KEY
PRESENTS

FROM THE
MAKERS OF
BRITAIN
AT WAR

VOL 1
1939-
1940

WORLD WAR II

621
You never know who's listening!
CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES
NEWS OF THE WORLD
WAR DECLARED
OFFICIAL

APPEASEMENT
How did Chamberlain get Hitler so wrong?

ALLIES
Britain and France stand together

CONSCRIPTION
National Service - How a generation went to war

DUNKIRK
The miracle rescue from the beach

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WORLD WAR TWO

1939-1940

Diplomacy had run its course and the politicians had run out of options. The moment that many feared had been reached. In the early hours of September 1, 1939, Hitler's forces poured over the Polish border. The Führer had expected that Britain and France would once more avoid confrontation, but this time he had overplayed his hand. Two days later the British Government declared war.

Mirroring the events of just 25 years earlier, a British Expeditionary Force was soon on its way to France. Gone though, was much of the bravado and jingoistic patriotism of that first world war. The raw reality of what a second European conflict would entail was still vividly etched in many people's memories.

From a British perspective, the first shots of World War Two were fired at sea. The Battle of the Atlantic, the longest campaign of the war, began just hours after Chamberlain's famous broadcast with the sinking of the liner *Athenia*. The subsequent introduction of the convoy system, U-boat actions and the Battle of the River Plate had, among other naval engagements, all been played out by the first Christmas of the war.

By the spring of 1940, the emphasis had generally switched to land warfare, initially, at the end of the Phoney War, in Norway, and then, after the beginning of the Blitzkrieg, in France and the Low Countries. In both theatres, the Allies were defeated.

After the evacuation from Dunkirk, it was in the skies over the Channel and Britain itself that the next major duels took place – first in the Battle of Britain and then, from September 7, 1940, in the Blitz. The latter saw the people of Britain on the front line as never before.

With stories and images representing the fighting on land, at sea and in the air, of the difficulties on the Home Front, and the aerial combats of the 'Spitfire Summer', the first 16 months of World War Two – September 1939 to December 1940 – are brought here into sharp and meaningful focus.

John Grehan

John Grehan
Editor

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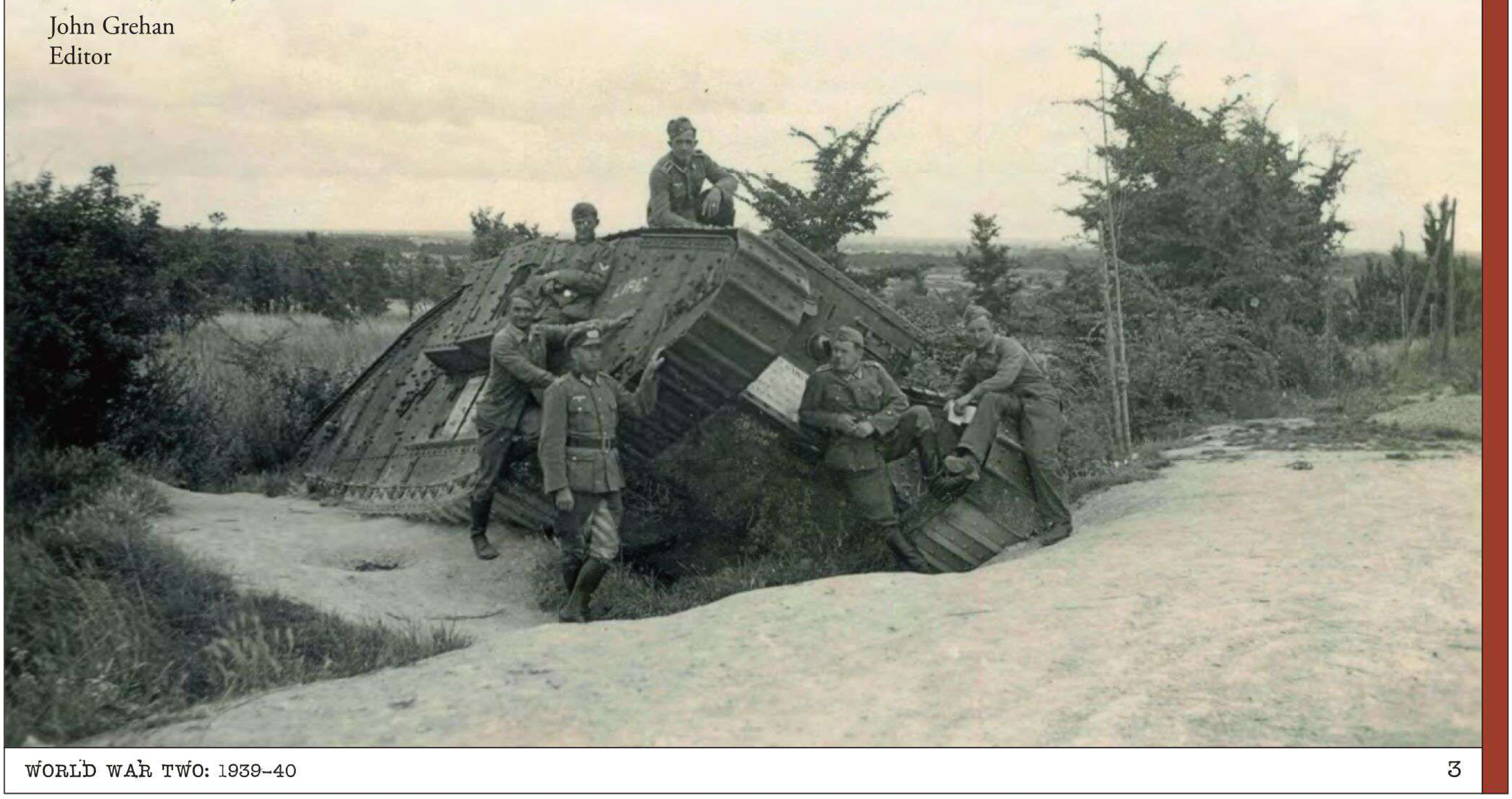
FRONT COVER IMAGE: A newspaper seller announcing the British Government's declaration of war. (Colourisation of Neville Chamberlain by colourbyrjm)



As the Blitzkrieg sweeps over France in the summer of 1940, these men from Hitler's armed forces stop to pose by a relic from the previous world war. This tank, a Mark IV Female No.2648, was, at the time, on display near Fort de la Pompelle, Reims. (Historic Military Press)

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HMS *Achilles* arriving back at Auckland following its involvement in the Battle of the River Plate. (Historic Military Press)

Members of the LDV on duty at a roadblock in Findon, Sussex, on June 26, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

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Men of the first Canadian Army contingent are pictured disembarking at Greenock, Scotland, in November 1939. (Historic Military Press)

The Anschluss begins as German troops pass a customs post on their entry into Austria on March 12, 1938. (Polish National Archives)

WAR OR PEACE?

The Great War of 1914-1918 had been the most destructive in human history. So devastating had been its effects, it was widely believed that there would never be another war between the industrial nations of Europe. As a consequence, when Nazi Germany began to flex its muscles in the latter half of the 1930s, every effort was made to appease its leader, Adolf Hitler.

On Saturday, March 7, 1936, 3,000 German troops marched across an invisible line to enter the Rhineland. By 11.00 hours, the 19 infantry battalions had reached the Rhine itself and three battalions then crossed the river. It was Adolf Hitler's most audacious political move since becoming German Chancellor three years earlier.

No one knew how Britain and France would react to this flagrant breach of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent Locarno Treaties, in which Germany agreed to the demilitarisation of the Rhineland.

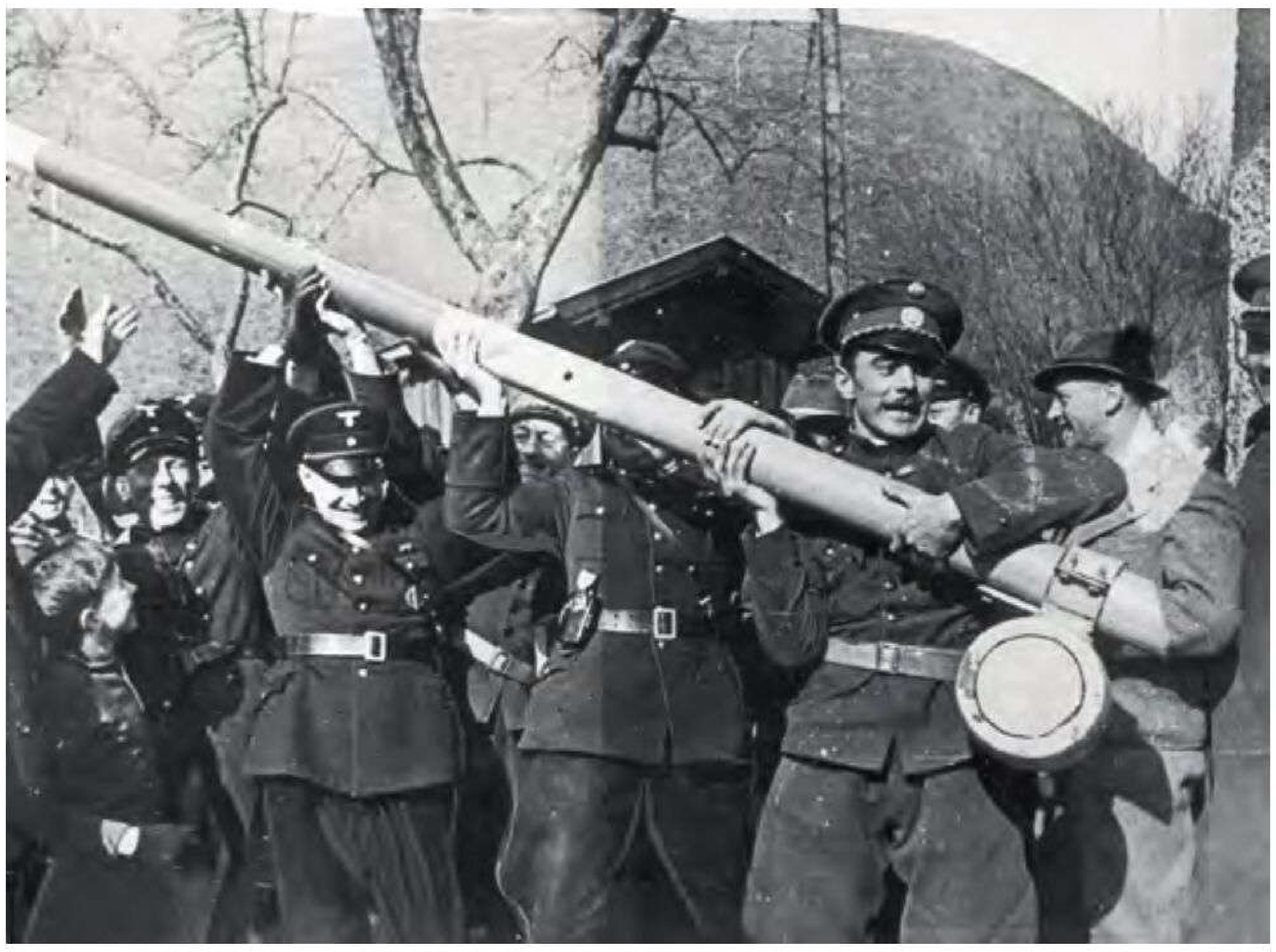
Still bearing the emotional scars of World War One along with the rest of his countrymen, nervous Général d'armée Maurice Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, knew he had to react, but dare not provoke any form of conflict. He ordered 13 divisions to move quickly up to the German border, strengthening the troops already manning the Maginot Line, but to advance no further.

The German generals were equally anxious, and the Heer's Chief-of-Staff, Generaloberst Ludwig Beck, warned Hitler that Germany was in no state to repel an invasion by French forces. Hitler had to agree to withdraw the troops from the Rhineland if the French moved their Army into the Rhineland. Both sides waited to see what would happen next.

In contrast to the murmurings in Paris and the relative silence in London, there was wild rejoicing across Germany of the news that Hitler had taken back sovereign Germany territory. When it became clear that neither France nor Britain was going to challenge the reoccupation of the Rhineland and the key industrial region of the Ruhr, Hitler dissolved the Reichstag and submitted himself and his policies to a plebiscite. The result was a 98.8 per cent return in favour of the Führer. Hitler had seen that Britain and France would back down in the face of a determined stance and that his people were with him, almost without exception. As a direct consequence, the reoccupation of the Rhineland would turn out to be only the start of Hitler's ambitions.

ANSCHLUSS – THE JOINING OF THE GERMANS

Hitler's generals had wanted him to wait until 1937, when Germany would be militarily stronger, before moving into the Rhineland. But the Führer's reading of the international situation had proven to be accurate. The lack of a reaction from France or Britain emboldened him to take the next step in his plan to create a Greater Germany – an area that would encompass all the German speaking people of central Europe.



German and Austrian border guards remove the barrier at a customs post after the beginning of the Anschluss, March 1938. (Polish National Archives)

After the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been stripped of most of the territory it had ruled for centuries, Austria had been left as a small, weakened country. The majority of its people wished to see it join with its German-speaking cousins, but this was not permitted under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler had demonstrated that he could challenge the signatories to the treaty with impunity and he believed he could do so again regarding Austria.

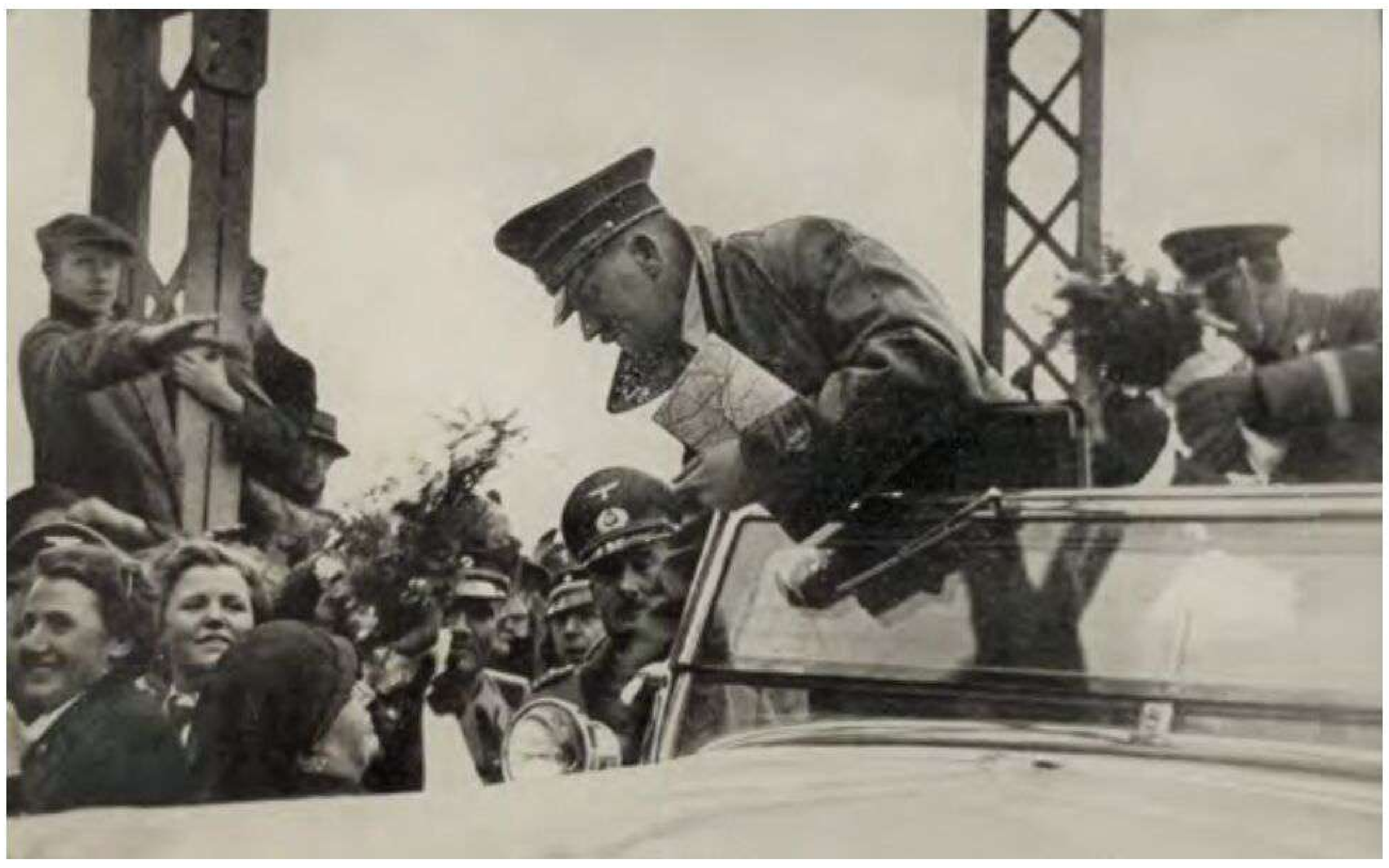
The rise to power of the Nazis in Germany had polarised opinion in Austria and, by 1938, increasing numbers viewed any amalgamation with Germany with great circumspection. Equally, there was a growing, and highly vocal, number of Austrians demanding the two countries should become one. In a bid to settle the issue once and for all, the Austrian chancellor, Kurt Schuschnigg, decided to call a referendum. The date was set for March 13, 1938.

As the result of the referendum was far from certain, Hitler told Schuschnigg that by only allowing Austrians to vote, he was denying the right of all Germans to decide if the countries should amalgamate. Schuschnigg cancelled the referendum. But it was already too late. Hitler had laid plans to invade Austria and nothing was going to stop him.

On the morning of March 12, the German 8th Army crossed the border into Austria, being greeted by rejoicing crowds waving swastikas and thrusting Nazi salutes. The Austrian Army, the Bundesheer, was ordered not to resist. Behind his troops, a jubilant Hitler entered the country of his birth, claiming that he encountered "such a stream of love as I have never experienced". The Anschluss – the joining, or unification – was complete within two days and confirmed in a plebiscite conducted across the whole of the Third Reich the following month. By not allowing anyone of Jewish or gypsy extraction to vote, it was claimed that 99.8 per cent of the votes cast in Austria were in favour of the Anschluss.

Members of the Austrian NSDAP, or Nazi Party, mobilise on the streets of Vienna after the Anschluss, March 13, 1938. (Polish National Archives)

A body of German police parade into the town of Imst in the Tyrol, Austria, during the Anschluss in March 1938. (Library of Congress)



To mark the Anschluss, Hitler entered Austria through the border town of Braunau am Inn, his birthplace. The original caption to this photograph states that it shows the German leader as he "crosses the border into Austria". (Courtesy of H. Blair Howell)

Joseph Goebbels pictured during his visit to Vienna after the Anschluss, March 29, 1938. (Polish National Archives)

GREATER GERMANY: THE SUDETENLAND

There was even less international reaction to the Anschluss than the occupation of the Rhineland. The British Prime Minster, Neville Chamberlain, was stating the obvious when he told the House of Commons that, "The hard fact is that nothing could have arrested what has actually happened [in Austria] unless we and others had been prepared to use force to prevent it."[1]

There was another large group of ethnic German-speaking people who lived in a region of the state of Czechoslovakia, a country which had been created out of the dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire. This region was the Sudetenland. Hitler had seen that Britain and France were not willing to become embroiled in affairs in central Europe and he was confident that he could seize the Sudetenland and the Western Allies would not lift a finger to oppose him.

CAFE OLYMPIA
TANZ DIELE
OLYMPIA
KAFFEE
FREMDEN ZIMMER

Having arrived in Austria, Hitler then commenced a journey through the country to the capital, Vienna, which he reached on March 15. Here he can be seen being greeted by enthusiastic crowds in Linz on March 13.

Hitler is driven through the city of Sankt Pölten to celebrate the Anschluss on March 14 or 15. Crowds such as this frequently greeted Hitler and other senior Nazi leaders during their victorious travels.

But the re-occupation of the Rhineland, which one British diplomat, Lord Lothian who, in 1939, became the British Ambassador to the United States, considered was no more than the Germans walking into "their own back garden"[2] and the Anschluss, which was not opposed by the Austrians, were entirely different matters from that proposed by Hitler regarding the Sudetenland, which was an integral part of another sovereign country. Unlike the previous two bloodless coups, the Czechs were certain to fight to defend their territory.

The German generals were convinced that if Czechoslovakia was invaded, the other European Powers would be forced to act, and that could only mean war – a war which Germany was still ill-prepared for. Beck tried again to point out the risks he believed that Hitler was running in planning to occupy Czechoslovakia, but his advice was dismissed out of hand by the Führer, who was becoming increasingly annoyed with the Chief of Staff's pessimism. For his part, Beck saw that his efforts to deter Hitler with reasoned analysis had failed and that the only way of preventing another European war was by removing Hitler, and the first plans were laid by some in the Herr to eliminate the Führer which would eventually lead to the famous Valkyrie assassination attempt of 20 July 1944.

Meanwhile, Hitler sought to create a situation which would justify Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland. The Sudeten pro-Nazi leader, Konrad Henlein, was instructed to demand autonomy for the Sudetenland which, of course, the Czech President, Edvard Beneš, could not possibly agree to. Beneš' rejection of Henlein's demands allowed Hitler to claim that the Sudeten Germans were an oppressed minority who were being denied their inalienable right of self-determination – an issue which had been at the heart of US President Wilson's Fourteen Points which formed the basis of the armistice which brought about the end of World War One.

AN ENGINEERED CRISIS

There was, in fact, a considerable degree of justification in the claims of the Sudeten people. They had not been consulted when the map of Europe was redrawn after the Armistice and the vast majority were unhappy at being a minority in a country they did not consider to be their home. Hitler backed Henlein's demands and insisted that "the oppression of three and a half million Germans in Czechoslovakia cease".

The European Powers knew they had to deal with the escalating crisis and there was some appreciation of the position the Sudeten Germans had been placed in. Both France and Britain, therefore, advised Beneš to accept the demands of the Sudetens and allow them to choose their own destiny. Beneš refused, instead ordering a partial mobilisation in anticipation of Hitler taking the Sudetenland by force.

With the prospect of war imminent, Neville Chamberlain stepped in, demanding that Beneš accept a mediator to resolve the problem. Having little choice, Beneš agreed to accept the Liberal politician, Lord Runciman, who arrived in Czechoslovakia on August 3, 1938. In the meantime, Henlein's appeals for independence from Czechoslovakia had become more strident and violent clashes between his followers and the Czech authorities had become widespread.

At this point the British Government learned through its Secret Service that German embassies had been told that Germany would invade Czechoslovakia on September 25, 1938. Chamberlain decided, therefore, that he needed to intervene personally in the crisis. On September 15, in what was the prime minister's first full flight in an aeroplane, Chamberlain flew to Germany, meeting Hitler at his mountain retreat in Berchtesgaden.

The Führer's motorcade passes through Vienna on March 15. That day, around 200,000 cheering Austrians gathered in the Heldenplatz to hear Hitler declare in a speech that, "The oldest eastern province of the German people shall be, from this point on, the newest bastion of the German Reich".

Following in Hitler's footsteps, other senior Nazi leaders made visits to Austria in the aftermath of the Anschluss. In this case it is Hermann Göring who is pictured making his way through the streets of Vienna on March 26, 1938.

BRITISH AIRWAYS

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain waves farewell as he boards his aircraft, a British Airways Lockheed 10 Electra, G-AEPR, for a flight to Germany on September 15, 1938. On that occasion, the first of three trips that month, he flew from Heston, London, to Munich for a meeting with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler at Berchtesgaden. Chamberlain returned to London the following day. (Historic Military Press)

Accompanied by the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Neville Chamberlain inspects a guard of honour on his arrival at Cologne on September 22, 1938. The second of three trips to Germany that month, Chamberlain went on to meet with Hitler in the Rheinhotel Dreesen at Bad Godesberg near Bonn. He returned to London on September 24. (Historic Military Press)

The result of the meetings was an agreement that, if supported by a favourable result in a plebiscite, the Sudetenland would be annexed by Germany. In return, Hitler would agree to leave the rest of Czechoslovakia alone.

"PEACE FOR OUR TIME"

Chamberlain returned to the UK believing that he had found a peaceful way to settle the matter. This view was shared by the French and then by Beneš – though this capitulation, as it was seen, led to the fall of the government in Prague.

Runciman then submitted his report on September 21. It was highly critical of the way in which the Sudeten Germans had been treated by the Czechs and he recommended the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany as the only practical solution.

With this in mind, Chamberlain took to the skies once more, meeting Hitler a second time on September 22. He was prepared to endorse Runciman's recommendations. But Hitler had other ideas. He wanted the whole of Czechoslovakia and he added further demands. The latter included the stipulation that Czechs fleeing the areas of the Sudetenland which would come under German control should not be allowed to take anything with them, and that Czechoslovakia would have to cede other areas of its territory to Poland and Hungary.

Chamberlain, once again, returned to the UK thinking that he had achieved a settlement, the terms of which were duly submitted to the French and the Czechs. But both of those countries were outraged with Hitler's new demands.

For a third time, Chamberlain flew to Germany, this time joining the French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, and the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, for talks with Hitler in Munich. At this meeting, Hitler told the other heads of state that he was going to settle the matter by invading Czechoslovakia on October 1.

On the same day that Chamberlain headed to Germany for his second meeting with Hitler, September 22, this picture was taken of preparations for war underway in London. It shows a lorry load of ARP stretchers being delivered to the Ministry of Health in Whitehall. (Historic Military Press)

Chamberlain is seen being greeted by Hitler on his arrival at the hotel. This was the second of three trips to Germany that ultimately led to the Munich Agreement. He returned to London on Saturday, 24 September. (Historic Military Press)

On September 29, 1938, Neville Chamberlain flew to Germany for the third and final time in that month, travelling from Heston, London, to Flugplatz Oberwiesenfeld, where this image was taken, in a Lockheed 14, G-AFGN, which was flown by Victor Flowerday. (Historic Military Press)

Eventually an agreement was reached in which the German army was to complete the occupation of the Sudetenland by October 10, and an international commission would decide the future of other disputed areas. Czechoslovakia was informed by Britain and France that it could either resist Germany alone or submit to the prescribed annexations. The Czechoslovak government chose to submit.

Before he left Munich, Chamberlain presented a document to Hitler. It contained three paragraphs, one of which included a phrase declaring "the desire of our two peoples never to go to war again". Hitler signed the document.

Chamberlain believed he had achieved a masterstroke. Upon his return to Heston Aerodrome, he was greeted by a jubilant crowd. He was cheered by ecstatic Londoners as he was driven to Buckingham Palace to report to the king. He then went to Downing Street, where he addressed the gathered well-wishers with the words of Benjamin Disraeli, that he had returned from Germany with "a peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time."

General Beck and the others in the German Heer who had planned to remove Hitler from power had aimed to march into the Reich Chancellery and arrest or kill Hitler before the October 1 deadline. But the deal between Hitler and Chamberlain had completely disarmed the plotters, with the rejoicing of the people in Britain being more than matched by that of the German *volk*. Hitler would never be more popular than at this moment.

As the German tanks rolled across the Czech border into Sudetenland unopposed on October 1, the conspirators knew that there was no longer any hope of mounting a coup against the Führer and they tossed "their lovely plans and projects into the fire". Chamberlain believed he had saved Europe. In reality, it was Hitler he had saved.

Chamberlain returned to Heston on September 30, 1938. He is seen here waving the piece of paper that resulted from the Munich Agreement which, signed the day before, the Prime Minster believed meant "peace for our time". (Historic Military Press)

The various signatories to the Munich Agreement gathered together on September 29, 1938. From left to right are the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, the French Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier, Adolf Hitler, the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, and the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano. (Historic Military Press)

The signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union on August 23, 1939. The Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, can be seen sat in front of the treaty ready to sign, whilst standing next to him is Alexey Shkvarzev, the Soviet Ambassador to Berlin. Directly behind Molotov is the Reich's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joachim von Ribbentrop. To von Ribbentrop's left is Stalin. Von Ribbentrop favoured retaining good relations with the Soviets and spoke against an invasion of Russia. (NARA)

CONFLICT OVER THE CORRIDOR

In the Treaty of Versailles, the German state of West Prussia had been handed to a reconstituted Poland and East Prussia had become a German enclave separated from the rest of Germany by the Polish-occupied 'Corridor'. Within the Corridor was the Free City of Danzig, which had been created in order to give Poland access to a well-sized seaport. Placed under the protection of the League of Nations, Danzig's population at the time was almost exclusively German. It was an inexplicable decision and one that was challenged by the Weimar Republic long before Hitler came to power – and it was what Hitler intended to deal with next.

Firstly, though, he wanted to make sure that his rear was secure. This meant taking what was left of Czechoslovakia. After the new Czech President, Emil Hácha, accepted a peaceful takeover rather than face military annihilation, German troops occupied Prague in March 1939.

NCISCVS. I
LAVRVM.
LITIBV

Senior Nazi leaders, including Hitler, during their tour of the city of Sankt Pölten after the Anschluss of Austria. (Polish National Archives)

Hitler now felt free to act. Once again he believed that Britain and France would sit on their hands if he invaded Poland, just as they had when his troops marched into the Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia, especially as the ethnic Germans in Danzig and the Corridor, by and large, wanted to re-join Germany.

As had now become a tried and tested formula, Hitler demanded the rights of self-determination of those Germans trapped in Poland and Danzig. Hitler also wanted an autobahn to be built through the corridor linking Germany with Danzig. The Poles could see exactly where this was going, and that unless they did something, their country would be dismembered in the same fashion as Czechoslovakia.

ANGLO-POLISH MILITARY ALLIANCE

Hitler had long advocated the need for more land for the growing German population, this he defined as “Lebensraum”, or “living space”. That space, he decided, was to be found in Poland – and to achieve this aim he intended to wipe the Polish nation from the face of the earth.

TRAITÉ
DE
VERSAILLES
28 JUIN 1919
P
IV 241

A portent of what was to come. The original caption to this image, dated August 28, 1939, states: “The hot corner. This marker, bearing the name and date of the Treaty of Versailles, stands at the spot where Poland, Danzig and East Prussia meet – and if Adolf Hitler gets what he wants it may be in the nature of a tombstone for the Treaty.” (Historic Military Press)

On March 31, 1939, however, Poland signed a treaty with France and Great Britain. The same day, Chamberlain informed the House of Commons in a statement that “in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power.”[3] The French Government endorsed this pledge.

The Poles believed that that had secured their safety, for Hitler would not risk a war with Britain and France after the disaster which befell Germany in World War One. The Polish pact with Britain and France did indeed seem to represent a potential obstacle in Hitler’s path. It seemed at last that the Western Allies would intervene if he attacked Poland, and the Poles, unlike the Czechs, were certain to resist. Poland also shared a border with the Soviet Union and the Kremlin was unlikely to stand idle while German troops occupied its neighbour. Then, on August 23, 1939, Hitler achieved a remarkable diplomatic coup.

On that date, Germany and the Soviet Union signed an agreement – the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact – in which the Soviets would not support Britain and France if they went to war over Poland. Furthermore, in a secret protocol, the Germans and the Soviets agreed to divide Eastern Europe, including Poland, between them.

With the might of the Soviet Union on his side, Hitler informed his generals that Poland would be invaded on September 1, 1939. Only one question remained. Would Chamberlain and Daladier seek to avoid war yet again, or would they finally accept the unthinkable and lead their countries into war?

NOTES:

1. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, vol. 333, cc45-169.
2. J R M Butler, *Lord Lothian, Philip Kerr, 1882–1940* (St. Martin’s Press, London, 1960), p.213.
3. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, vol. 345, col.2415.

Damaged, destroyed and abandoned Polish Army equipment pictured during the German invasion of Poland, September 1939. (Polish National Archives)

POLAND INVADED

The tension had been mounting for days, as Hitler's demands had grown. Not only did Hitler want Danzig to be returned to Germany and the Polish Corridor eliminated, but also that the minority rights Germans had earlier enjoyed, and which had been renounced when Hitler came to power, had to be reinstated. None of this was acceptable to the Poles.

Britain and France both tried to bring the opposing sides together and this pressure, particularly from Britain, resulted in a communication from the German Government on August 29 offering to negotiate with a Polish representative who had the power to sign an agreement, providing that this person arrived in Berlin the next day. When Polish Ambassador Józef Lipski went to see the German Foreign Minister, not the following day, but on August 31, he informed von Ribbentrop that he did not have full power to sign an agreement. It was all the excuse Hitler needed. At 04.45 hours the following morning, German forces invaded Poland.

Hitler had expected that Britain and France would once again avoid confrontation, but this time he had overplayed his hand. In a packed House of Commons, Prime Minister Chamberlain told MPs that a note was being handed to Ribbentrop at 21.30 hours that night by Sir Nevile Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin. It stated that, "unless the German Government are prepared to give His Majesty's Government satisfactory assurances that the German Government have suspended all aggressive action against Poland and are prepared promptly to withdraw their forces from Polish territory, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will without hesitation fulfil their obligations to Poland". A similar note was to be issued by the French Government. The only response von Ribbentrop gave Sir Nevile was that the note would be passed onto Hitler.

A portrait of Adolf Hitler which was taken by his personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, on September 1, 1939 whilst he was delivering a speech detailing the invasion of Poland. (Dutch National Archives)

All day the British and French governments waited in vain for a reply from the German Chancellor. At 19.44 hours, Chamberlain rose to deliver an address to the Commons. The Italian Government had proposed that hostilities should cease and that there should then immediately be a conference between Great Britain, France, Poland, Germany and Italy. The prime minister told the House that the government could not take part in a conference while Poland was being subjected to invasion. He reiterated that, "His Majesty's Government will, as stated yesterday, be bound to take action unless the German forces are withdrawn from Polish territory".

At 09.00 hours on September 3, Nevile Henderson informed von Ribbentrop that Germany had until 12.00 hours (11.00 hours in the UK) to announce that it was prepared to comply and withdraw its troops from Poland or else a state of war would exist between Britain and Germany. A similar message was sent from the French to Berlin by telephone.

An hour after the note had been handed to the German foreign minister, the BBC announcer Alvar Lidell warned listeners to expect an announcement from the Prime Minister in just over an hour's time – 11.15 hours. The nation held its breath.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR

Everyone in the country waited for the announcement that Alvar Lidell had warned was coming. At 11.15 hours on that fateful Sunday, a profound silence descended upon every home in the land as men, women and children gathered round their wireless sets. The music stopped and the thin voice of the Neville Chamberlain, speaking from the Cabinet Room in 10 Downing Street, uttered these memorable words:

"This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany." Lidell would later recall how "crumpled, despondent and old" the Prime Minister looked at this point.

Everyone who heard that speech would remember the moment with startling clarity. A young Douglas Higgins from Middlesex recalled the scene that morning as his family waited for Chamberlain's broadcast: "I had never known a silence like this before or seen such worry etched on my family's faces." When the reality of what his parents had just heard struck home, Douglas saw his mother cry for the first time in his life.

One man who had listened intently to Chamberlain's announcement was Richard Brown. Musing over what he had just heard, Brown made the following entry in his diary: "Chamberlain sounded quite annoyed and, at the same time, sorrowful, and I noted that he referred to 'Hitler' and not the usual, diplomatic, 'Herr Hitler'!"

Edward Heath was sitting by the radio in his parents' kitchen at the family home in Broadstairs. Learning of the declaration of war the future Prime Minister heaved a sigh of relief, "not because we wanted a war, but because for so long we had known it was inevitable".

DISPATCH
SPECIAL LATE NEWS
WAR
-OFFICIAL

A newspaper seller on the streets of London on September 3, 1939, carries a board pronouncing the declaration of war between Britain and Germany. (Historic Military Press)

A crowd gathers in Parliament Square on September 2, 1939, eager to learn of any developments as the war clouds darken. The grainy appearance of this photograph is because it is an example of a 'radiophoto', which, as the name suggests, was "radioed from London to New York". (Historic Military Press)

After France made the same move a few hours later, having presented an ultimatum in Berlin at 12.30 hours, and which expired at 17.00 hours, King George VI presented his own speech at 18.00 hours. It was also broadcast around the Empire by the BBC: "In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you, as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself. For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war. Over and over again we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies. But it has been in vain…'

"There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield. But we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful to it, then, with God's help, we shall prevail."

THE SIRENS SOUND

Barely had the Prime Minister finished speaking when a “strange, prolonged, wailing noise” sounded around the London area. It was 11.27 hours when, for the first time in World War Two, the distinctive and immediately recognisable warbling notes of the air raid sirens echoed out over the capital’s streets.

Even though the nation had been preparing for war for many months, and the Air Ministry and the newspapers had warned of the horrors of aerial bombing, now, within minutes of the declaration of war, it was seemingly going to happen. Winston Churchill’s wife, Clementine, wryly commented on the Germans’ “promptitude”.

However, whilst the sirens should have prompted a rush for the shelters, many simply wandered out into the streets to see what was happening. “All along the street”, recalled a resident of Fulham, “people were standing at their gates, and many decided it was a practice, but the wardens ordered people indoors, though hardly any followed their instructions. Curiosity in many cases overcame fear; people stood together at their open front doors or looked up at the sky with a curious blend of apprehension and interest in this new menace from the sky.”[1]

Indeed, Churchill later recorded about how he and Clementine “went up to the flat top of the house to see what was going on. Around us on every side, in the clear, cool September light, rose the roofs and spires of London. Above them were already slowly rising thirty or forty cylindrical balloons. We gave the government a good mark for this evident sign of preparation.”

Civilians make their way to the shelters. The original caption to this image states: “Without fuss, even with smiles, and with curiosity as to what would happen next rather than fear, the people made for the shelters which were already in being. There was confidence that our defences were in good order. The little group [seen here] ... was snapped in Whitehall on the morning of September 3rd.” (Historic Military Press)

London prepares for war as workmen remove some of the ornamental lighting from the streets surrounding the Houses of Parliament. (Danish National Archives)

There was a similar absence of fear at Holland Park until police on bicycles rode around shouting “Take Cover!” This naturally caused panic. People started running “frantically” with some diving into any open door they could find.

Winston Churchill, having perhaps decided that caution was the better part of valour, had made his way down from his roof top viewpoint and headed to the nearby shelter some 100 yards away from his home. He looked out from the top of the shelter steps: “As I gazed from the doorway along the empty street and at the crowded room below, my imagination drew pictures of ruin and carnage and vast explosions shaking the ground; of buildings clattering down in dust and rubble, of fire-brigades and ambulances scurrying through the smoke, beneath the drone of hostile aeroplanes”.[2]

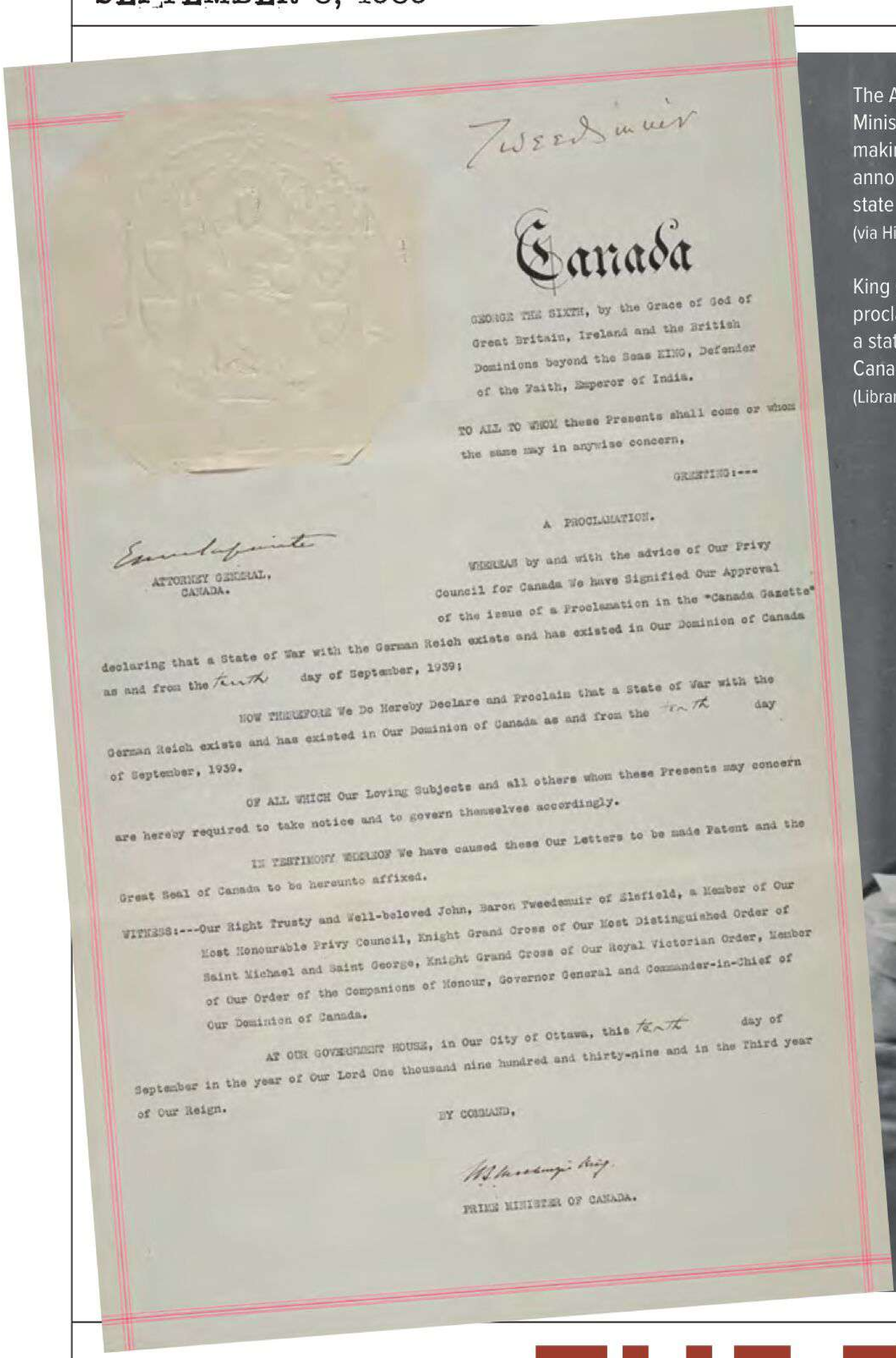
Many, as equally imaginative as Churchill, were utterly terrified. At least one Londoner was reported to have died of heart failure.

After about ten minutes the “All Clear” was sounded. The air raid was a false alarm caused by an unidentified aircraft which had passed through the area covered by No.1 Observer Group at Maidstone, Kent, at 5,000 feet. It was travelling north-east into Kent and Areas 1, 2 and 3 were put on Red Alert. It was later discovered that it was a solitary French aircraft that had not filed a flight plan. Normality, or something close to it, was eventually restored.

NOTES:

[1] Philip Ziegler, *London at War* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995), p.36.

[2] Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume One*, (Cassell, London, 1950), p.329.



Tweedsmuir

Canada

GEORGE THE SIXTH, by the Grace of God of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the Seas KING, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India.

TO ALL TO WHOM these Presents shall come or whom the same may in anywise concern,

GREETING:---

A PROCLAMATION.

ATTORNEY GENERAL,
CANADA.

WHEREAS by and with the advice of Our Privy Council for Canada We have Signified Our Approval of the issue of a Proclamation in the "Canada Gazette" declaring that a State of War with the German Reich exists and has existed in Our Dominion of Canada as and from the tenth day of September, 1939;

NOW THEREFORE We Do Hereby Declare and Proclaim that a State of War with the German Reich exists and has existed in Our Dominion of Canada as and from the tenth day of September, 1939.

OF ALL WHICH Our Loving Subjects and all others whom these Presents may concern are hereby required to take notice and to govern themselves accordingly.

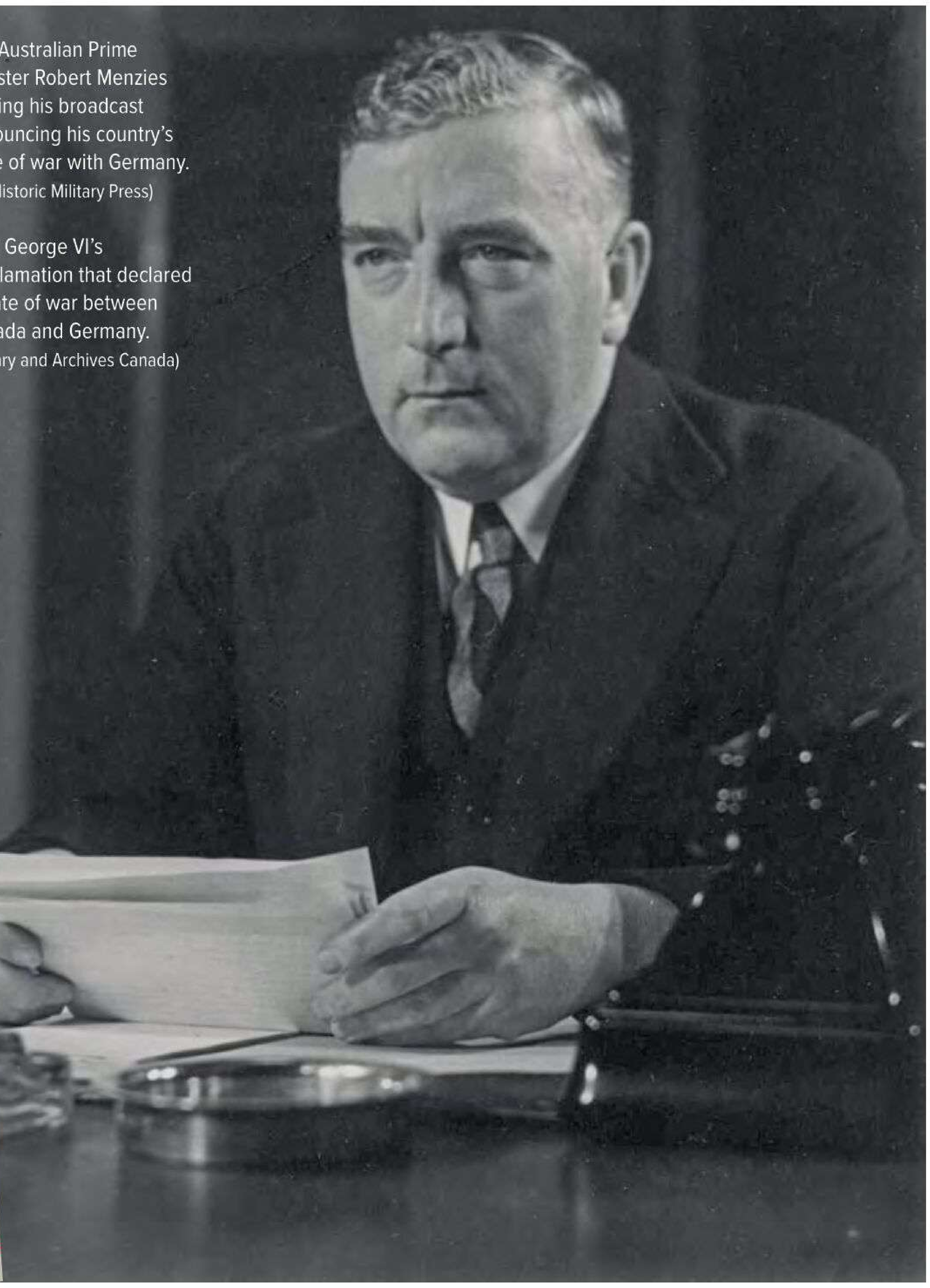
IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF We have caused these Our Letters to be made Patent and the Great Seal of Canada to be hereunto affixed.

WITNESS:---Our Right Trusty and Well-beloved John, Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, a Member of Our Most Honourable Privy Council, Knight Grand Cross of Our Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, Knight Grand Cross of Our Royal Victorian Order, Member of Our Order of the Companions of Honour, Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Our Dominion of Canada.

AT OUR GOVERNMENT HOUSE, in Our City of Ottawa, this tenth day of September in the year of Our Lord One thousand nine hundred and thirty-nine and in the Third year of Our Reign.

BY COMMAND,

PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA.



The Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies making his broadcast announcing his country's state of war with Germany. (via Historic Military Press)

King George VI's proclamation that declared a state of war between Canada and Germany. (Library and Archives Canada)

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Chamberlain's declaration of war was transmitted across the Empire. It was 20.00 hours local time when his announcement was heard in Australia. Seventy-five minutes later the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, delivered his own broadcast on the ABC: "It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that, in consequence of a persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war."

As was the case in Britain, such an outcome was no surprise. Indeed, it was on September 2, 1939, that a proclamation had been made in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* declaring the "extreme danger of war". The next issue, also published on the 2nd, contained a further proclamation which mobilized Australia's citizen forces. The next day, and the next issue, included the announcement by Robert Menzies of the state of war between Great Britain and Germany, as well as a proclamation by the Governor-General detailing the existence of war in Australia.

Unlike Australia and India, which in 1939 still held that the King's declaration of war automatically extended to all his Dominions, as had been the case in 1914, New Zealand acted in its own right by formally declaring war on Germany. It did so without any hesitation.

Officially, New Zealand's declaration of war was simultaneous with that from London, at the expiry of the British government's ultimatum – which was at 21.30 hours New Zealand Standard Time. In reality, ministers and senior officials in Wellington waited for formal confirmation of the expiry of the ultimatum and Britain's declaration of war on Germany. When this was received the acting Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, issued a statement confirming that New Zealand was at war: "This is not an occasion for many words; it is a dark day in the history of the world… It is with deep regret and sadness that I make this announcement on behalf of the Government, and the people will receive it with similar feelings. That will not, however, affect the determination of both Government and people to play their part."

As with New Zealand, Canada was not automatically bound by the British declaration of war, though few doubted that the country would quickly follow. The political leaders in Canada opted to seek the approval of the federal parliament for such a decision, and its members duly sat in a special session on September 7. Two days later parliamentary authority for a declaration of war was given. The next day, September 10, King George VI officially announced that Canada had entered the conflict against Germany.

South Africa, despite internal friction against the decision, declared war against Germany on September 6 after Jan Smuts became Prime Minister, replacing the previous incumbent, the pro-Afrikaner and anti-British J B M Hertzog. A protectorate of the United Kingdom since the late 1800s, Bahrain declared war on September 10, four days after Malta. The Dominion of Newfoundland made its stand on September 4, the same day as Nepal, whilst the Sultan of Oman declared war against Germany on September 10.

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain pictured leaving No.10 Downing Street in 1939. (Danish National Archives)

WAR CABINET ESTABLISHED

Having completed his broadcast to the nation, Chamberlain immediately turned his attention to a full-scale reorganisation of the government. With his plans finalised, Chamberlain duly announced them to the British people the same day.

The most important element of Chamberlain's reshuffle was the creation of a War Cabinet on the lines of that established in December 1916. Consisting of nine members, without doubt the most dramatic change to the ministerial line-up saw the return of Winston Churchill. The arch anti-appeaser, and for so long a thorn in the Prime Minister's side, was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty.

Winston Churchill pictured in April 1940 towards the end of his time as the First Lord of the Admiralty. (Polish National Archives)

Formally the Office of the First Lord of the Admiralty, this individual was the political head of the Royal Navy and the person who was the government's senior adviser on all naval affairs and the one responsible for the direction and control of the Admiralty. It was a role that Churchill had fulfilled in World War One. As around the world the might of the Royal Navy was stirring following the declaration of war, the famous signal "Winston's Back" was flashed to the fleet.

Predictably, Winston Churchill, the man who above all others who had urged positive action against Germany, was almost relieved that war had come at last. "As I sat in my place," he later recalled, "listening to the speeches, a very strong sense of calm came over me, after the intense passions and excitements of the last few days. I felt a serenity of mind and was conscious of a kind of uplifted detachment from human and personal affairs. The glory of Old England, peace-loving and ill-prepared as she was, but instant and fearless at the call of honour, thrilled my being and seemed to lift our fate to those spheres far removed from earthly facts and physical sensation."

Unlike Lloyd George's War Cabinet in World War One, the members of this one, which was largely dominated by Conservative Party ministers, were also heads of government departments. This, though, was a situation that was not universally popular, as the *Edinburgh Evening News* reported on September 29: "M.P.s are beginning to criticise the constitution of the War Cabinet. The criticism is not confined to Members of the Opposition parties. A good many Ministerialists share the view, which is now being freely expressed by Labour, that the War Cabinet is not only too large, but is also composed of the wrong people. One criticism is that the men who are entrusted with the conduct of the war should be free from detailed Departmental duties. It is felt that Ministers who have to give most of their time to the day-today work of the Service Departments are not in the best positions to take a broad view of the situation as a whole, and that this should be the special duty of the War Cabinet."

Such debates, however, were a matter for future discussion. There was, after all, a war to be fought.

THE LINER SS ATHENIA SUNK

Just after 19.00 hours on the evening of Sunday, September 3, 1939, Captain James Cook, master of the 13,500-ton passenger liner SS *Athenia,* joined his first-class guests for dinner. At the time, his ship was steaming across the Atlantic, outbound from Glasgow to Montreal with 1,103 passengers onboard, including women and children who were being evacuated to Canada and over 300 Americans who were fleeing Europe due to the prospect of war. As he sat down, Cook was completely unaware that the liner was being stalked by a German U-boat.

Commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Fritz-Julius Lemp, *U-30* had departed Wilhelmshaven on its first war patrol on August 22, 1939. Having been informed of Britain's declaration of war on September 3, it was at 16.30 hours the same day that Lemp spotted his first victim. The U-boat was then about 250 miles north-west of the island of Innistrahull, off Ireland's north coast, and some 60 miles south of Rockall. Lemp immediately ordered his crew to close in on the potential target.

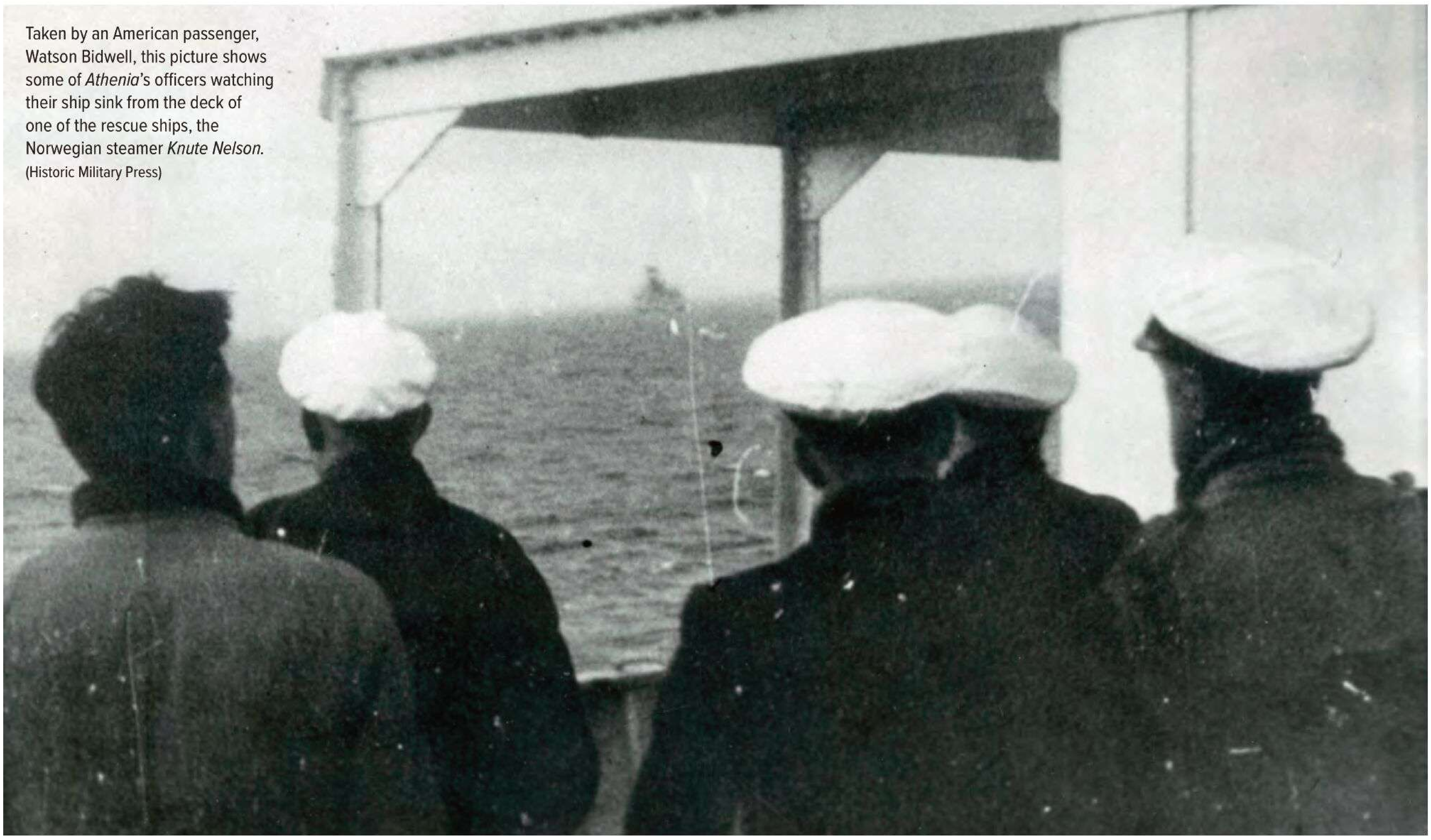
By about the time that Captain Cook sat down to eat, Lemp had made his decision. Whilst he could see that the ship in his periscope was large enough to be a passenger liner, and which, therefore, he was not permitted to attack, he noted that it zig-zagging at high speed. Because of the ship's unusual course, through the Rockall Banks, and the fact that it was also blacked out, Lemp decided that it was either a Q-ship or an armed merchant cruiser and, according to his rules of engagement, could therefore be attacked without warning.

Over the next few minutes *U-30* manoeuvred into a suitable position from which to strike. At 19.40 hours he gave the order and two torpedoes were fired. The first shots of the Battle of the Atlantic, the longest campaign of World War Two, had been fired.

Though one of the two torpedoes misfired, the other slammed into the liner's port side, in the area of the engine room, and exploded. The dining room was plunged into darkness and tables and chairs sent skidding across the deck. "As we were falling asleep at about 20 minutes to eight," recalled Philip Gunyon who was seven years old at the time, "there was a big boom and then the ship went dead in the water". A third torpedo was fired, but this also missed. The damage, though, had been done and, as the sea flooded in, the stricken *Athenia* began to list to port before settling by the stern.

Though fatally damaged, *Athenia* remained afloat on a calm late-summer sea long enough to allow a rescue operation to be mounted by Royal Navy ships, led by HMS *Electra*, and three merchant vessels. In fact, *Athenia* did not finally sink until 10.40 hours the next morning, at which point she slipped beneath the waves stern first. Of the 1,418 passengers and crew onboard, some 117 were killed.

A young boy, wrapped in a blanket, is carried down the gangway of the rescue ship *Knute Nelson* at Galway Harbour. (Historic Military Press)



Taken by an American passenger, Watson Bidwell, this picture shows some of *Athenia*'s officers watching their ship sink from the deck of one of the rescue ships, the Norwegian steamer *Knute Nelson.* (Historic Military Press)

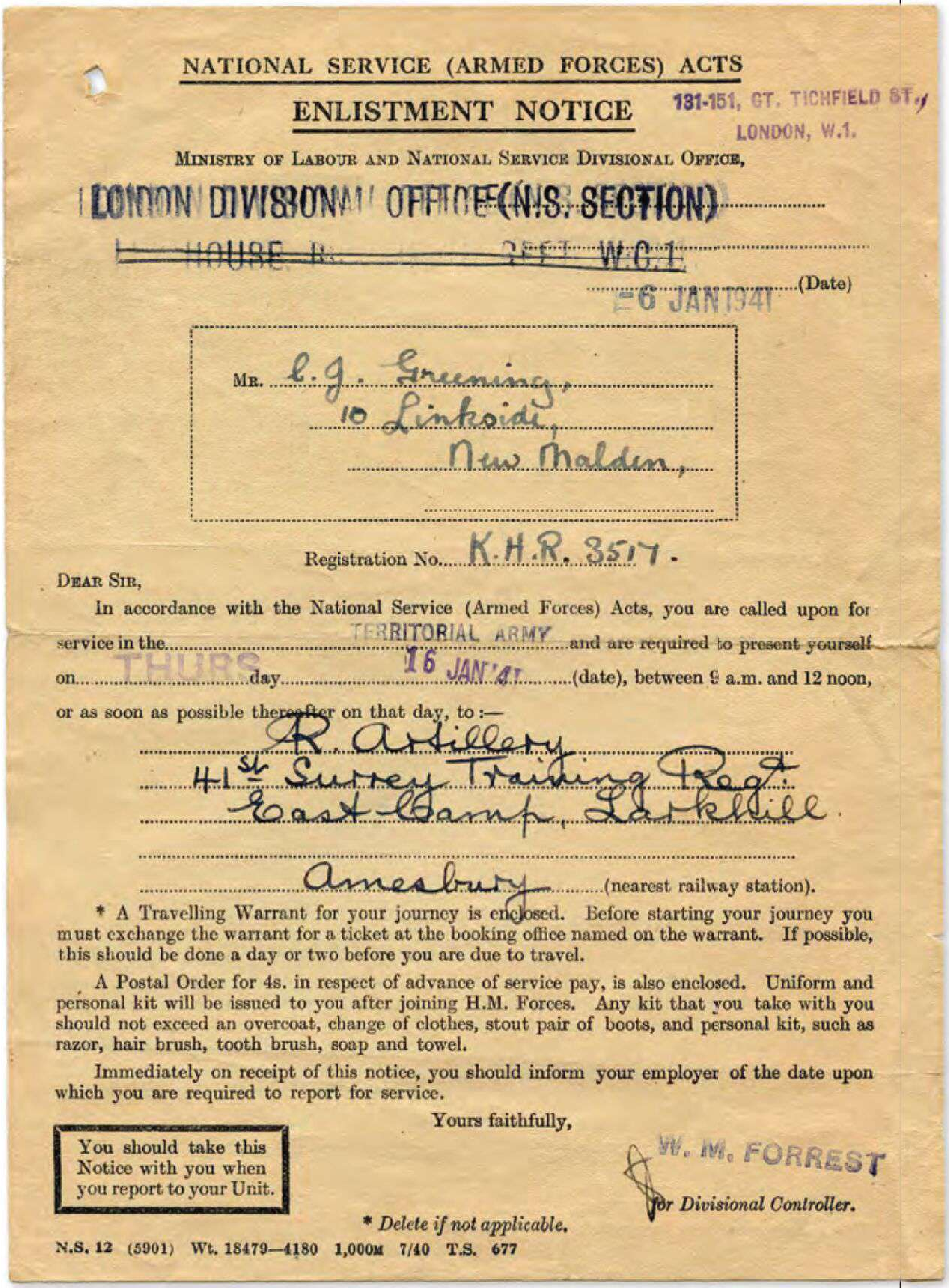
CONSCRIPTION INTRODUCED

At the start of World War Two the British Government was better prepared for legislative action than it had been in 1914. Indeed, the equivalent emergency powers legislation to the earlier conflict's Defence of the Realm Act, the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939, passed through all of its Parliamentary stages as early as August 24, 1939.

In many ways, the Act was the first piece of legislation that saw the United Kingdom being placed on a war footing. It enabled the government to introduce such controls and regulations that it felt were necessary to pursue the war effectively on what became known as the Home Front. Its provisions were extended by a second Act in 1940, which also contained wide-ranging powers. Together the 1939 and 1940 acts included provision for punishment, detention without trial, and for the requisitioning of land and property for military use. A number of detailed defence regulations were also introduced under these Acts, one of which included, as we shall see later in this book, the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers.

The unusually rapid pace at which Parliament moved in the summer of 1939 did not pass unnoticed. "Since August 25, when the threat of war became imminent," noted the *Western Daily Press* on September 6, 1939, "a mass of legislation of the most drastic character has been passed practically without demur. Powers have been taken to regulate the lives and activities of citizens and to dispose of their affairs in a manner which the dictatorships themselves could hardly excel. But whereas in the latter case the people have had no voice on the decisions of their leaders, in this country every restraint on the liberty of the subject has been adopted in accordance with strict democratic procedure.

"Without any deviation from a free Parliament and a free Press, the nation has imposed upon itself a discipline which its enemies abroad may justly envy. It has instituted military service on an extensive scale, has surrendered to the Executive powers of the most far-reaching scope, voted huge war credits and assented various Bills to enable the country to pass smoothly from a peace-time to war-time economy."



NATIONAL SERVICE (ARMED FORCES) ACTS

ENLISTMENT NOTICE

131-151, GT. TICHFIELD ST.,
LONDON, W.1.

MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND NATIONAL SERVICE DIVISIONAL OFFICE,

LONDON DIVISIONAL OFFICE (N.S. SECTION)

~~HOUSE [illegible] W.C.1~~

6 JAN 1941 (Date)

MR. C. J. Greening,
10 Linkside,
New Malden,

Registration No. K.H.R. 3517.

DEAR SIR,

In accordance with the National Service (Armed Forces) Acts, you are called upon for service in the TERRITORIAL ARMY and are required to present yourself on THURS day 16 JAN '41 (date), between 9 a.m. and 12 noon, or as soon as possible thereafter on that day, to:—

R. Artillery
41st Surrey Training Regt.
East Camp, Larkhill.

Amesbury (nearest railway station).

* A Travelling Warrant for your journey is enclosed. Before starting your journey you must exchange the warrant for a ticket at the booking office named on the warrant. If possible, this should be done a day or two before you are due to travel.

A Postal Order for 4s. in respect of advance of service pay, is also enclosed. Uniform and personal kit will be issued to you after joining H.M. Forces. Any kit that you take with you should not exceed an overcoat, change of clothes, stout pair of boots, and personal kit, such as razor, hair brush, tooth brush, soap and towel.

Immediately on receipt of this notice, you should inform your employer of the date upon which you are required to report for service.

Yours faithfully,

W. M. FORREST
for Divisional Controller.

You should take this Notice with you when you report to your Unit.

* *Delete if not applicable.*

N.S. 12 (5901) Wt. 18479—4180 1,000M 7/40 T.S. 677

The Enlistment Notice which, issued under the National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939, directed the named individual to present him/herself at the stated place on a given day and date. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

New recruits arrive at their depot or barracks during the winter of 1939-1940. (Danish National Archives)

The sheer scale of the parliamentary effort can be gauged by the fact that on September 1 an impressive total of 18 emergency Acts were passed. Between them they had been subjected to a total of four-and-a-half hours debate in the Commons and two-and-a-half hours in the Lords.

A further four Acts were passed on September 3. Of the latter, the most important was the National Service (Armed Forces) Act. This piece of legislation imposed conscription on all males aged between 18 and 41, except those who were medically unfit or in reserved occupations such as baking, farming, medicine, and engineering. Conscientious objectors were required to appear before a tribunal to argue their reasons for refusing to join-up. If their cases were not dismissed, they were granted one of several categories of exemption, and were given non-combatant jobs.

THE RAF'S FIRST ATTACK

Like the Royal Navy, the RAF had also been anticipating the outbreak of war. As part of its preparations, orders were issued that its first attack was to be made against units of the German fleet in their North Sea bases.

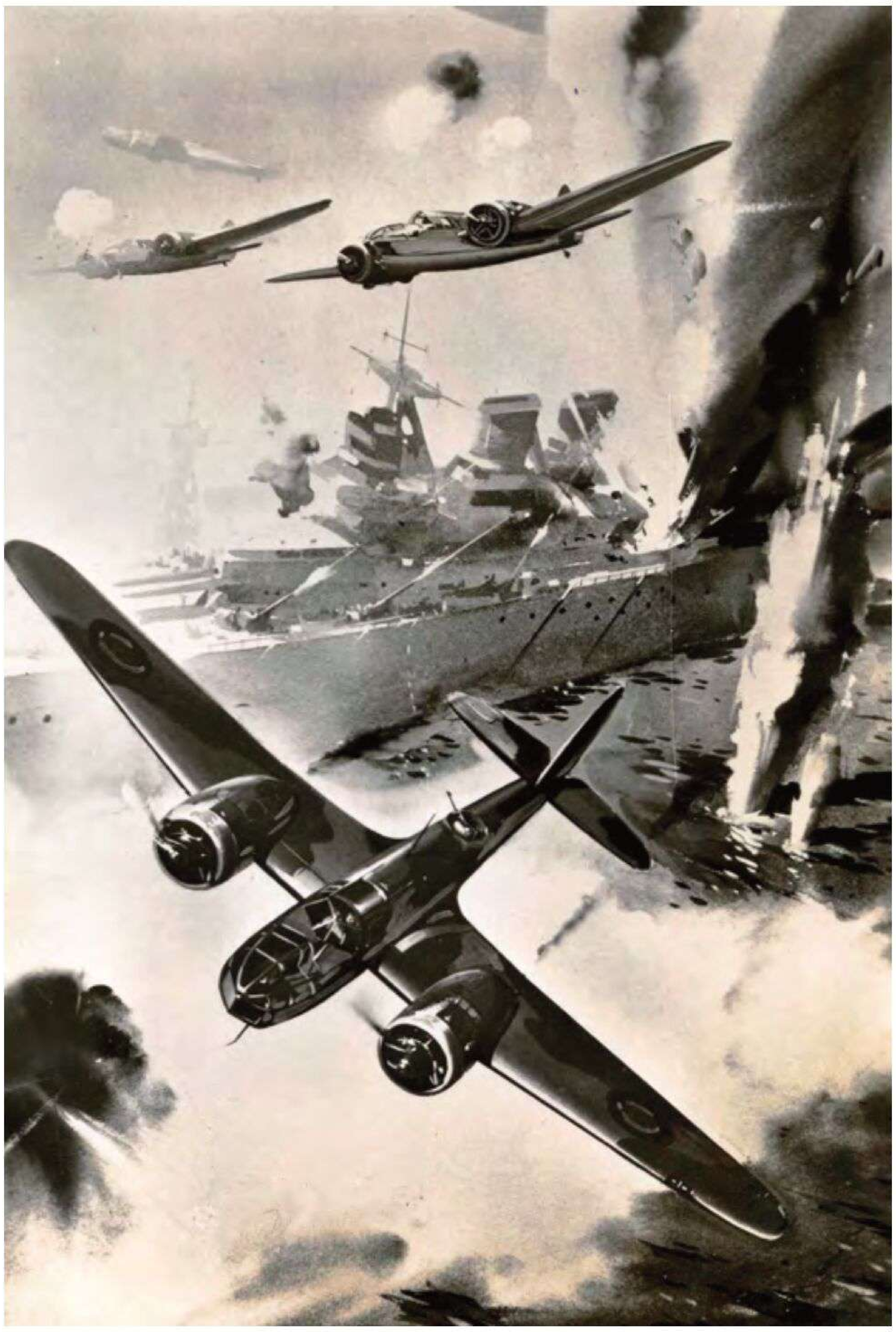
To facilitate this mission, a Bristol Blenheim of 139 Squadron had been placed on standby at RAF Wyton since September 1. Its role was to undertake aerial reconnaissance of the Kriegsmarine's ports on the German coast and identity possible targets. The aircraft detailed to undertake the attack itself were ready to take-off from the morning of September 2.

Forty-eight minutes after Chamberlain's fateful broadcast the next day, the reconnaissance aircraft was airborne. Crewed by Flying Officer A McPherson and Corporal V Arrowsmith, the Blenheim, N6215, also carried a single passenger, Commander Thompson RN, who would act as a naval observer. The official historian of the RAF's wartime service, Denis Richards, later described what followed: "The two men saw several enemy warships emerging into the Schillig Roads from Wilhelmshaven; but the aircraft was flying at 24,000 feet and the intense cold had frozen the wireless. Not until the Blenheim landed could the crew report their vital information. With afternoon already turned to evening the striking force had then taken off, only to be baulked by thunderstorms and the oncoming darkness."

McPherson's Blenheim was the first British aircraft to cross the German coast in World War Two. It was only a few hours later, however, that others followed in its path. During that first night of the war, a force of ten Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bombers, three from 51 Squadron and seven from 58 Squadron, were despatched on the RAF's first leaflet drop, a type of mission that came to be known as a *Nickel* raid. The aircraft involved all returned safely, though three of them had been forced to land at bases in France. Between them they had deposited some 5.4 million leaflets on Hamburg, Bremen and nine cities in the Ruhr, all of which carried a statement by the Prime Minister setting forth the reasons why Britain and French were at war with Germany.

By 08.30 hours the next morning, McPherson was airborne again from Wyton. "Thick low clouds forced him down almost to the surface," continued Richards, "but he persisted with his task; and from 300 feet he and his observer saw and photographed warships in Brunsbüttel, Wilhelmshaven, and the Schillig Roads. Once more there was an attempt to radio an advance report, and once more it failed – the message was received, but in corrupt form. Nothing could be done until the aircraft landed."

On learning of the presence of German warships, a frantic two hours of intense activity followed while ground crews worked to change the bombs of the striking force – poor weather meant that the attack would now have to be made at low level. With this completed, the attackers, comprising 14 Vickers Wellingtons of Nos. 9 and 149 squadrons and 15 Blenheims of Nos. 107, 110 and 139 squadrons, were soon on their way.

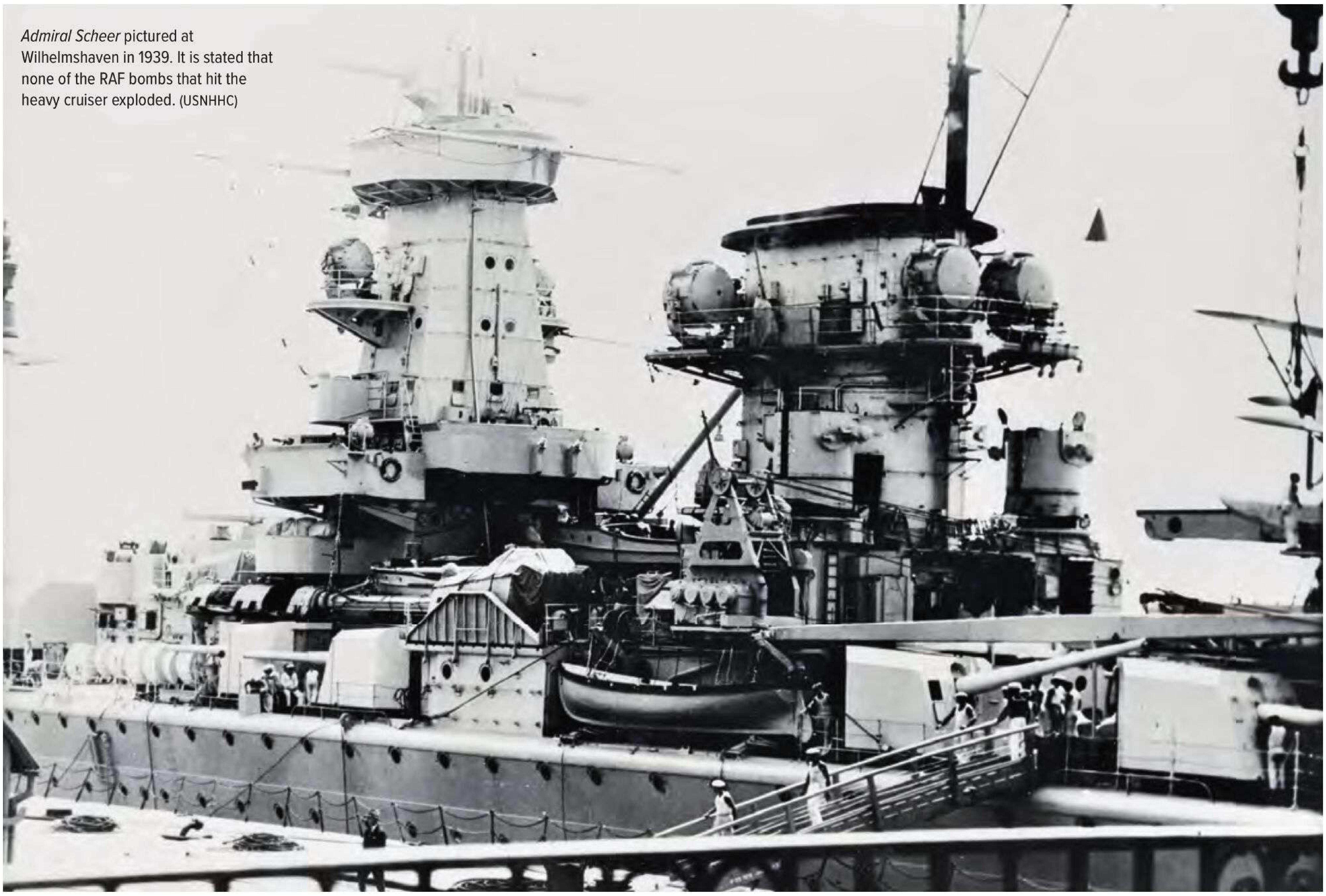


A stylised drawing that depicts the Blenheims attacking a German warship during the RAF's first attack of World War Two. (Historic Military Press)

One of the Blenheim pilots was Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Doran of 110 Squadron. He later recalled his part in the attack: "[We] flew on towards Wilhelmshaven. Suddenly a couple of barges appeared out of the murk and vanished. At the same time we got our first sight of the German coast. After a bit of feverish map-reading, we decided we were in the approach to the Schillig Roads. By an incredible combination of luck and judgement we were bang on our track.

Five of the Blenheims were shot down during the raid, all bar one being from 107 Squadron. This is the wreckage of one of the attackers on the quayside at Wilhelmshaven. (National Museum of Denmark)

German personnel examine the wreckage of one of the shot-down Blenheims. All five were the victims of anti-aircraft fire. Some of the Wellingtons, of which two failed to return, were attacked by Luftwaffe fighters. (National Museum of Denmark)



Admiral Scheer pictured at Wilhelmshaven in 1939. It is stated that none of the RAF bombs that hit the heavy cruiser exploded. (USNHHC)

"Within a few minutes, cloud base lifted to 500 feet and we saw a large merchant ship; just beyond it was the *Admiral Scheer*. No. 110 Squadron had planned to attack in two sections of three and two, hoping to get all the aircraft from each section attacking from different directions and over the target within the 11 seconds delay before the bombs exploded. Nos. 4 and 5 of the formation were therefore ordered to break away, and Nos. 1, 2 and 3 opened out to make their attack.

"The *Scheer* was anchored in shallow water, near the bank and protected from the landward side by a 'pin-cushion' balloon barrage. So we decided to make our attack slightly across the fore and aft line of the ship, and make our getaway by a sharp turn to port to avoid the balloon barrage. We climbed as high as we could, which was about 500 feet, and made our attack in a shallow dive. As we approached, we saw the matelots' washing hanging out around the stern and the crew idly standing about on deck. It seemed as though we had caught them, literally, with their pants down.

"However, when they realized that our intention was hostile they started running like mad, and as aircraft No. 1 came over at masthead height and dropped its bombs bang amidships, their A.A. got into action, and this together with shore-based A.A. kept us pretty busy carrying out evasive measures. The bombs from the second aircraft undershot by about ten yards and exploded in shallow water directly under the ship. No. 3 found he could not get over within the 11 seconds and dropped his bombs on another target." Doran, who is often credited with dropping the first Allied bombs of the war, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in the attack.

Seven of the aircraft involved were lost. Flight Lieutenant W Barton and his 107 Squadron crew were the first RAF casualties of the war when their Blenheim, N6184, was shot down by anti-aircraft fire from *Admiral Hipper*. Sergeant George Booth, an observer on another of the 107 Squadron Blenheims, became the first British prisoner of war when his aircraft was brought down over the German coast. In a peculiar twist of fate, the 110 Squadron Blenheim piloted by Flying Officer Henry Emden crashed on the deck of the German cruiser with the same name, *Emden*, which was damaged. Meanwhile, two of the Wellingtons failed to locate Brunsbüttel and bombed Esbjerg in neutral Denmark, 110 miles north of their intended target, where two civilians were killed.

Civilians gather at a block of flats that was hit one of the bombs dropped in error on Esbjerg. One person was killed at this location. (National Museum of Denmark)

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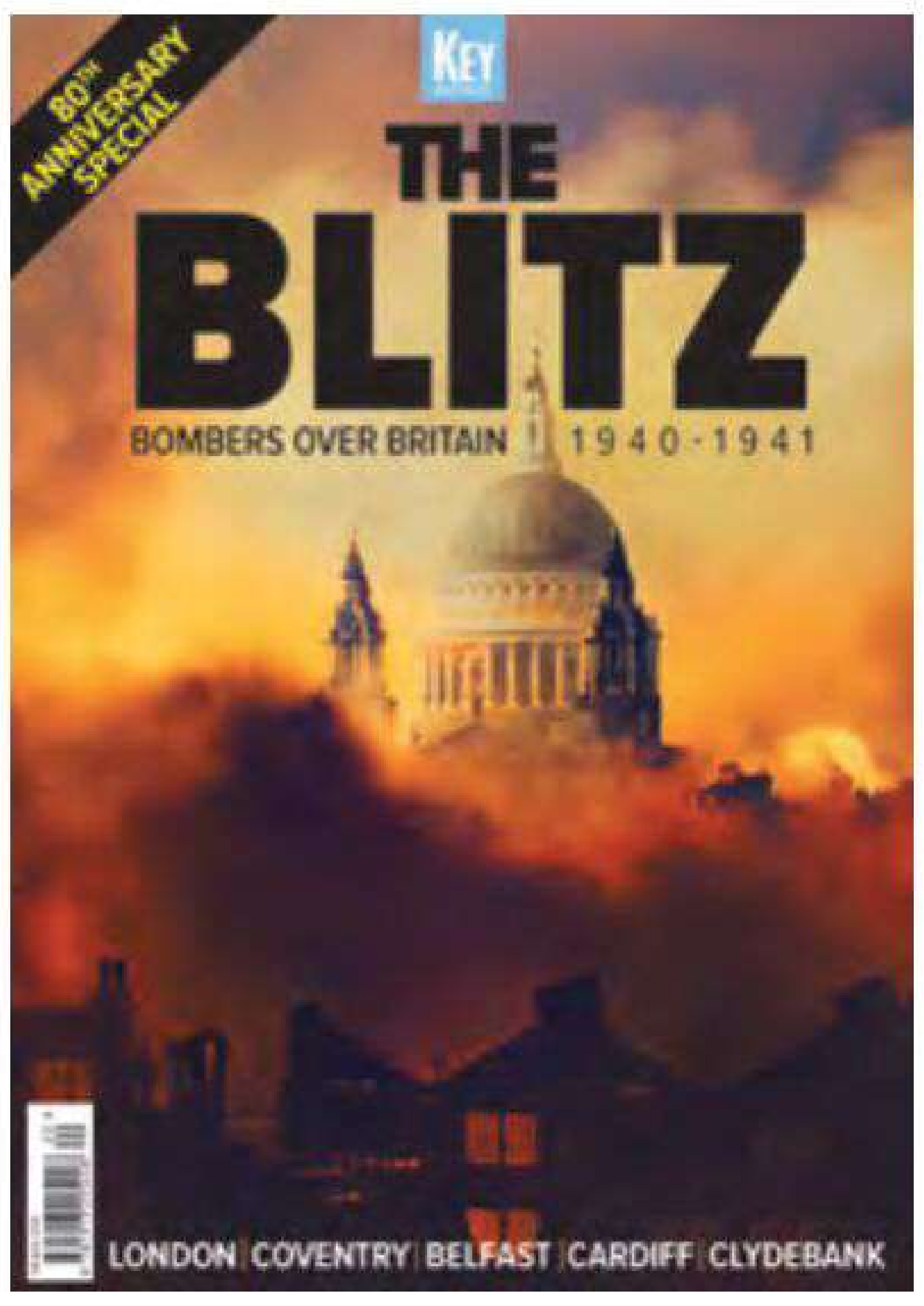
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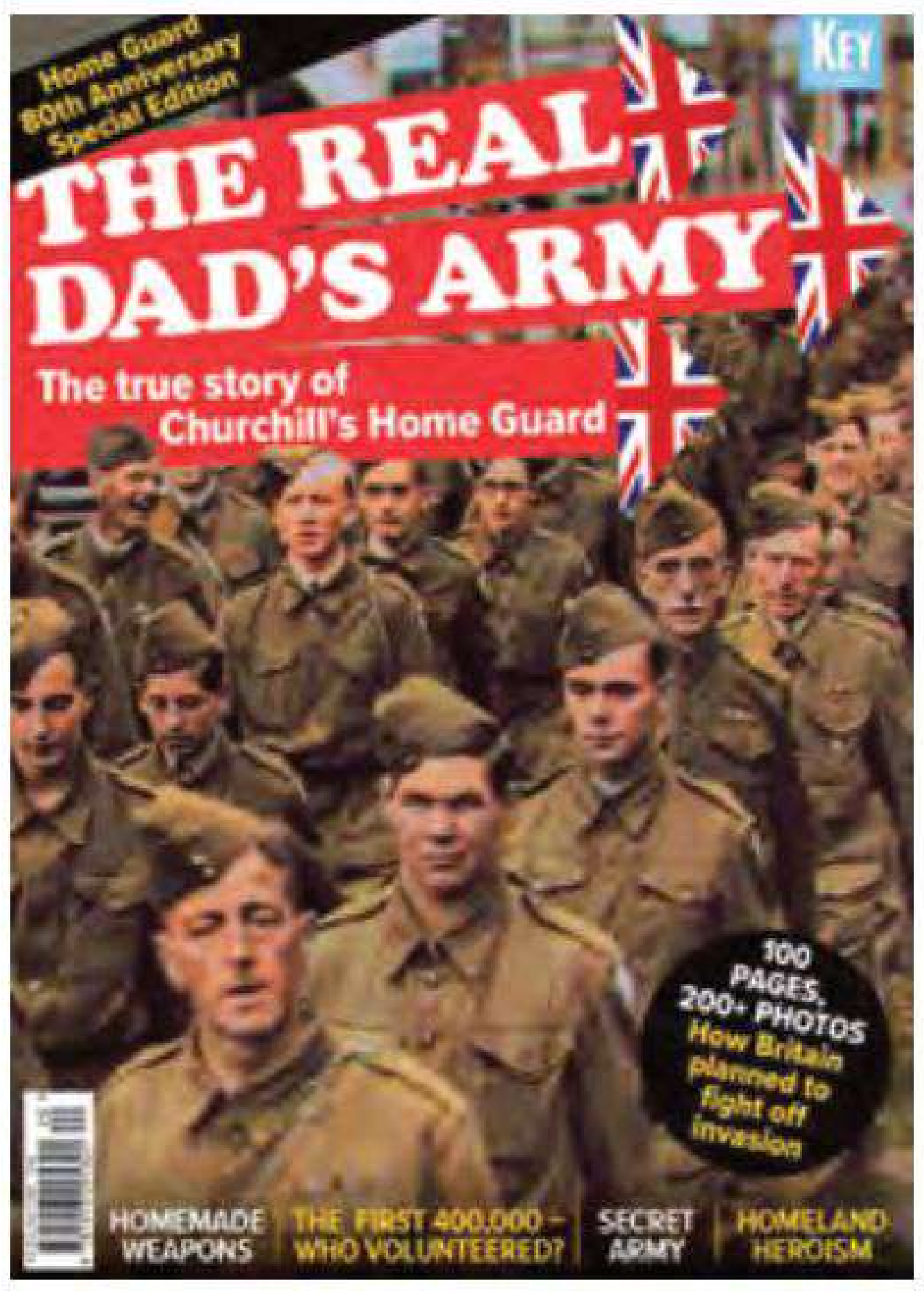
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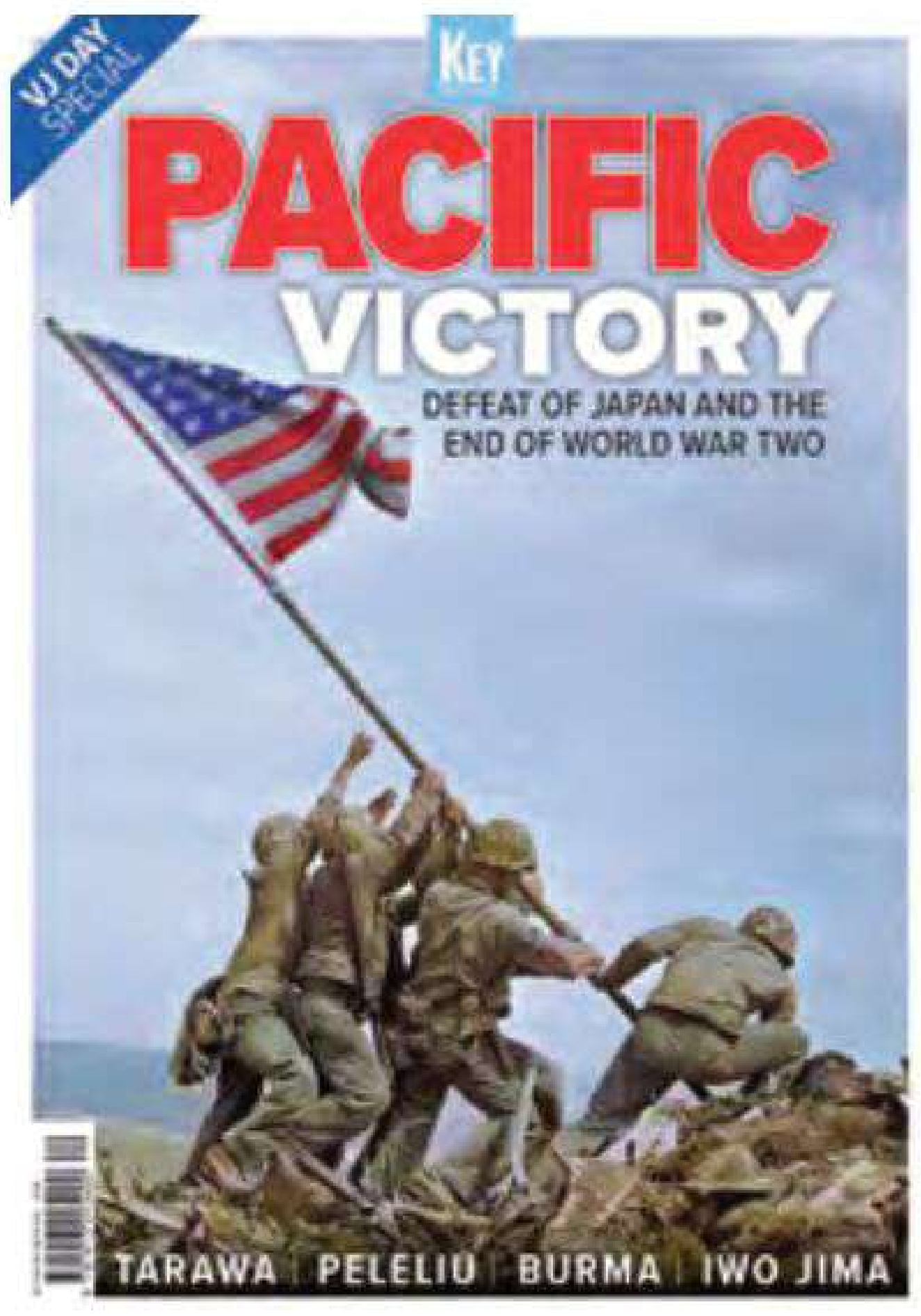
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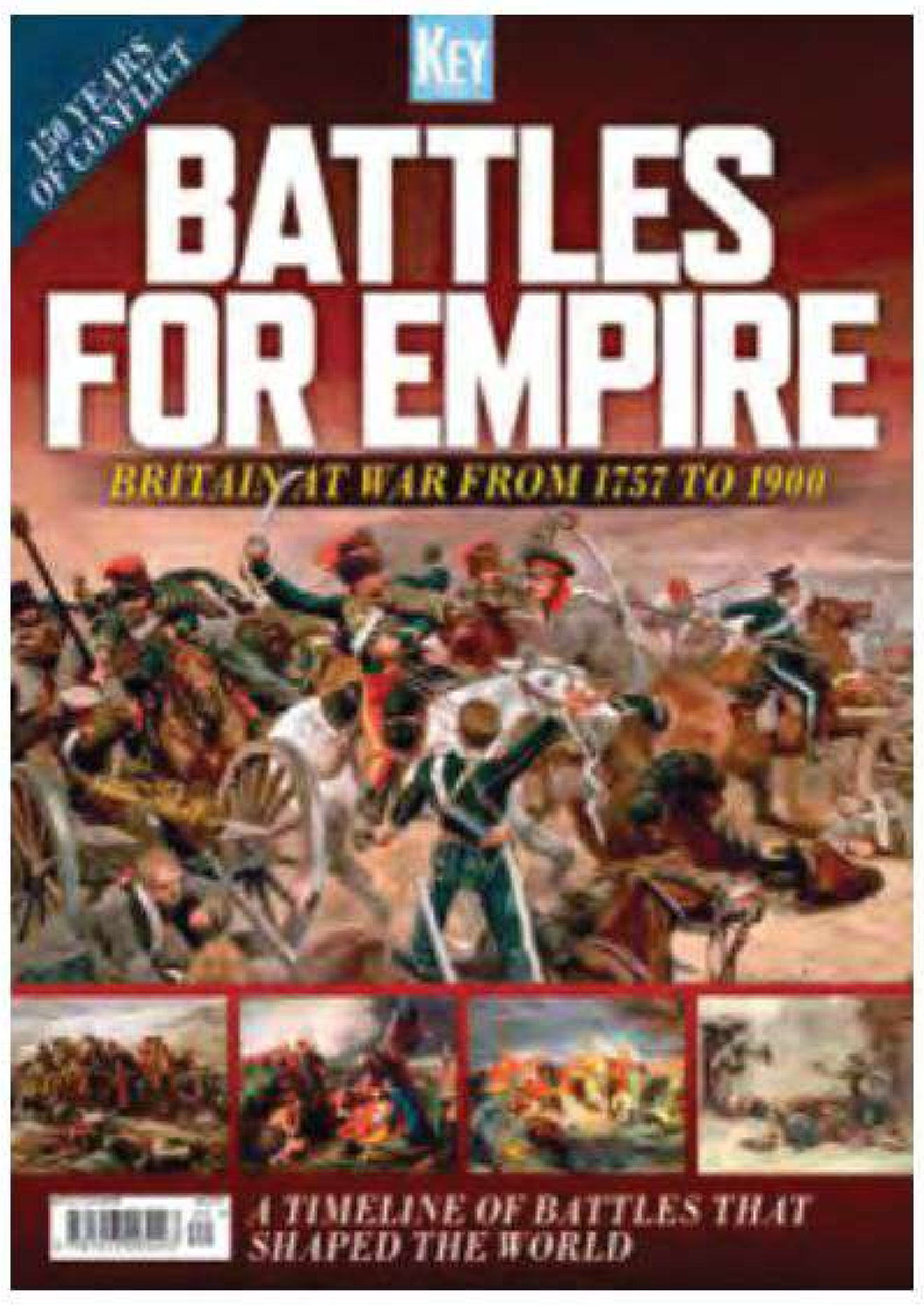
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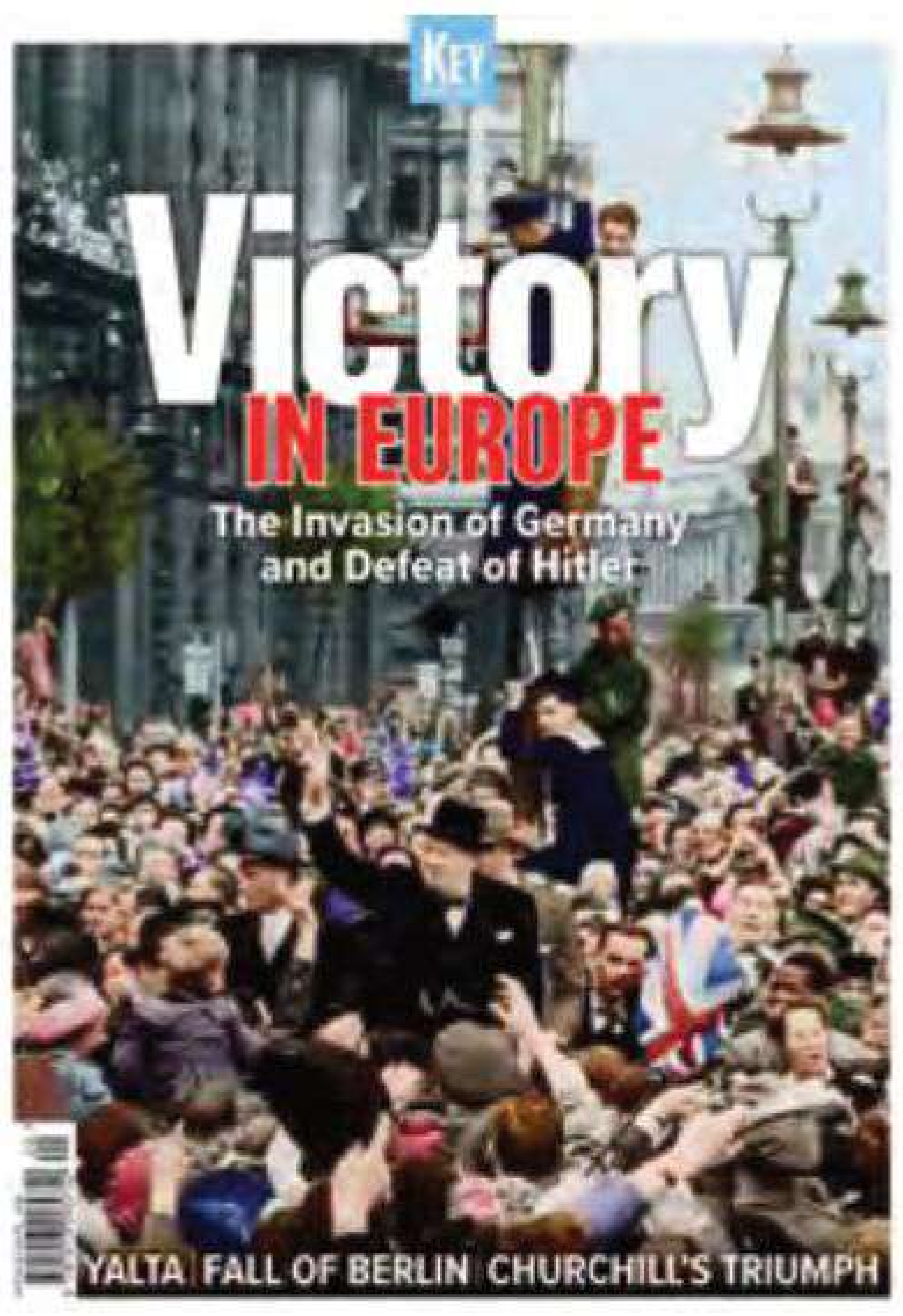
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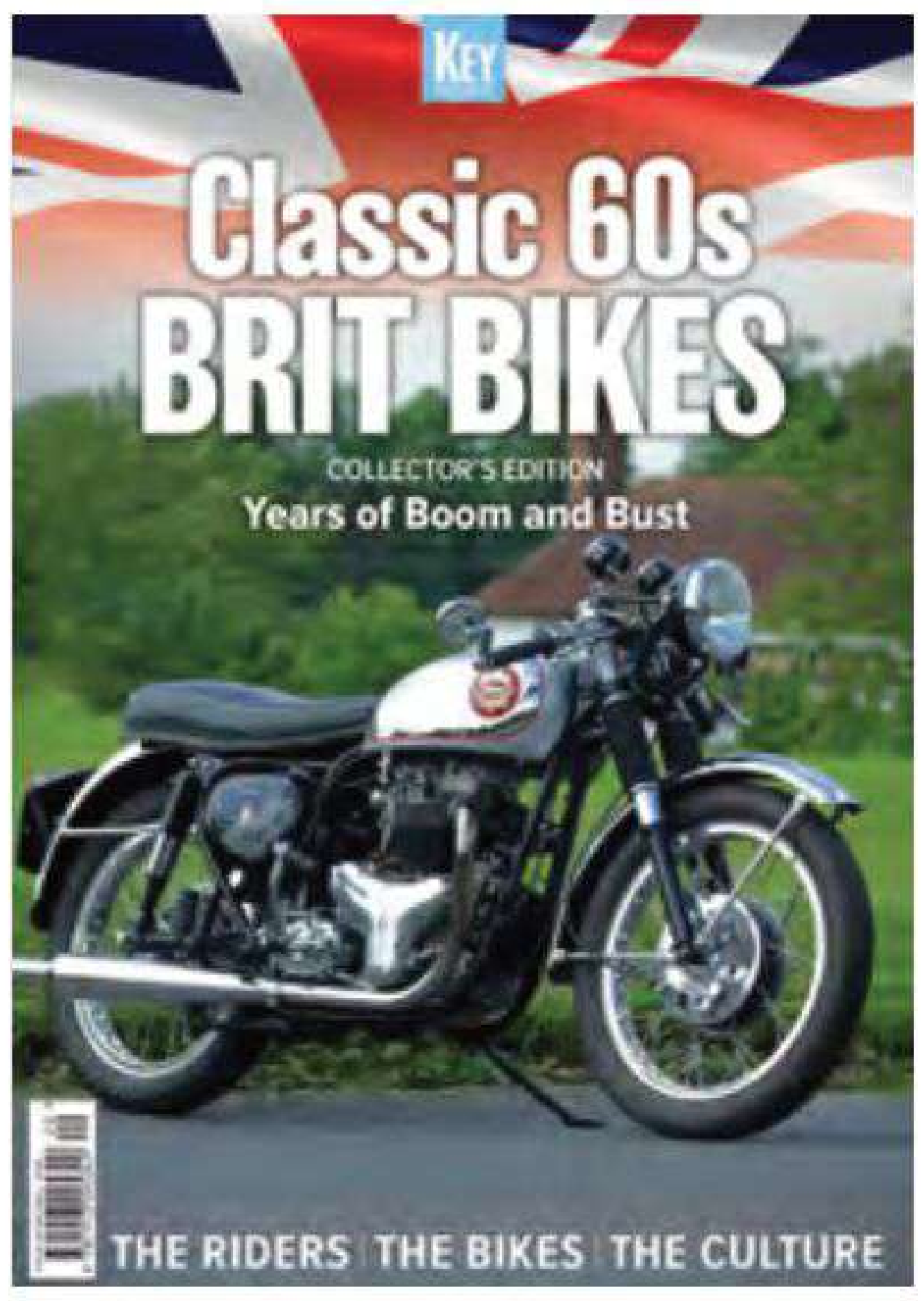
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Troops of the Manchester Regiment making their way along a sandy track near the quayside at Cherbourg after arriving in France in September 1939. In the background is HMS *Express*. (Historic Military Press)

BEF MOVES TO FRANCE

Though small advance elements and some technical personnel of the British Expeditionary Force, which was commanded by General Lord Gort, began arriving in France on September 4, 1939, it was not until the 10th that the move began in earnest.

As Gort later noted in his despatch of April 21, 1940, "the plans for the despatch of the Force differed in two important respects from those of August 1914. The possibility of attack by sea and air made it necessary to use the Western ports of France instead of the Channel ports, while the total replacement of animals by mechanical vehicles, which had been completed by 1939, presented a new problem in transportation."

As a result of these considerations, the troops themselves were landed at Cherbourg, while their stores and vehicles were despatched to the ports of Nantes, St. Nazaire, and Brest.

Men of 38 Company Royal Engineers laying the concrete foundation for a pillbox at Bercu near the Belgian border in 1939. (Historic Military Press)

"This plan," continued Gort, "entailed the early despatch of staff with the proper complement of units of the Docks and other Transportation Services. The personnel of these Services were in the main recruited from the Port Authorities in Great Britain at the outbreak of war. These units were operating to full capacity at the berths allotted to the Force, within forty-eight hours of landing, and the programme was carried out according to the timetable throughout the whole period of the disembarkation of 1st and 2nd Corps. This I regard as a feat deserving of the highest praise.

"On landing the fighting troops were passed rapidly through transit camps and their vehicles were cleared at once to Vehicle Marshalling Parks, whence they were despatched in convoys, while troops left by rail on the same day as they landed. Since the troops and their vehicles were landed at different ports they had to be collected in an assembly area which had been chosen in the vicinity of Le Mans and Laval. The assembling of troops by rail and vehicles by road took about six days. The resource of individual drivers was tested by changes of programme, inevitable in an operation of this kind, by the damage which some vehicles had sustained during the sea passage and by mechanical failures. Drivers and vehicles were on the road for long periods, but their duty was lightened by the hospitality of the French inhabitants, which all ranks will recall with gratitude."

The BEF's move from its assembly areas began on September 26, in this instance involving elements of I Corps. On schedule, I Corps duly moved into the front line, taking over the Maulde-Gruson sector on the Belgian frontier from the French Army, on October 3. It was followed in due course by other BEF formations.

The BEF spent the next seven months training and constructing defences through a bitter winter in readiness for action. By May 1940, it had been built up to over 390,000 men. This consisted of five regular and five Territorial divisions stationed on the Belgian frontier where, as in 1914, the main German attack was expected.

FIRST U-BOAT SUNK

Along with three sister submarines, the Type IXA U-boat *U-39* had sailed from Wilhelmshaven on August 19, 1939. Commanded by Korvettenkapitän Gerhard Glattes, *U-39* headed out into the North Sea intending to head around the Scottish coast.

Some three weeks later, the British aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, commanded by Vice Admiral Lionel Wells, sailed from Scapa Flow accompanied by a destroyer escort. Their task was to form a hunting group and undertake an anti-submarine patrol in the western Atlantic. Such groups were formed at the instigation of Winston Churchill following his return as First Lord of the Admiralty. At the outbreak of war, the Admiralty had swiftly reintroduced the convoy system that had been so effective in World War One. Such defensive measures, however, did not sit well with Churchill, who was by his very nature more offensive in outlook. One of his first moves, therefore, was to promote an offensive strategy against the U-boats, which led to the introduction of the hunting groups, such as that formed around *Ark Royal*.

At 15.07 hours on September 14, as *U-39* neared Rockall Bank, an almost unbelievable target presented itself to Glattes – HMS *Ark Royal*. He ordered that two torpedoes be fired at the carrier, which, at the time, was steaming on a south-westerly course and making 26 knots to catch up with some of her escort who were about two miles ahead.

At 15.12 hours, Leading Signalman Joseph Ernest Hall, one of those on watch, spotted the torpedoes' tracks. His prompt and accurate report enabled the Officer of the Watch to put the carrier's helm over to port, causing the torpedoes to pass astern and detonate about half a cable on the port quarter.

The carrier's escorts immediately set about tracking down *U-39*. One of the destroyers, HMS *Foxhound*, soon picked up an ASDIC contact and went straight into the attack, followed in turn by HMS *Faulknor* and HMS *Firedrake*. All three dropped a pattern of depth charges in the same area, *Firedrake* was the last to do so. Seconds later the stricken *U-39* surfaced, at which point all three destroyers opened fire.

A whaler, lowered by HMS *Faulknor*, sets off to rescue survivors from the U-boat's crew.

Foxhound was preparing to ram when some of the submarine's crew were spotted jumping into the water from her conning tower. All three destroyers moved in to recover any survivors, during the course of which *Foxhound* rescued 25 men, *Firedrake* eight and *Faulknor* the remainder. All 43 onboard survived.

In due course all of the U-boat's crew, only one of whom was injured, were transferred to *Foxhound*. It was reported that all three depth charge attacks had had an effect, the last one bursting the foremost tanks which forced *U-39* to the surface. The survivors were all landed at Kirkwall the next day and went on to spend the rest of the war in various prisoner of war camps in the UK, including the Tower of London, before being shipped to Canada. *U-39* was the first of many U-boats to be sunk in World War Two.

Taken from the decks of HMS *Faulknor*, this is the moment that *U-39* surfaced after the depth charging by the three destroyers.

HMS COURAGEOUS TORPEDOED

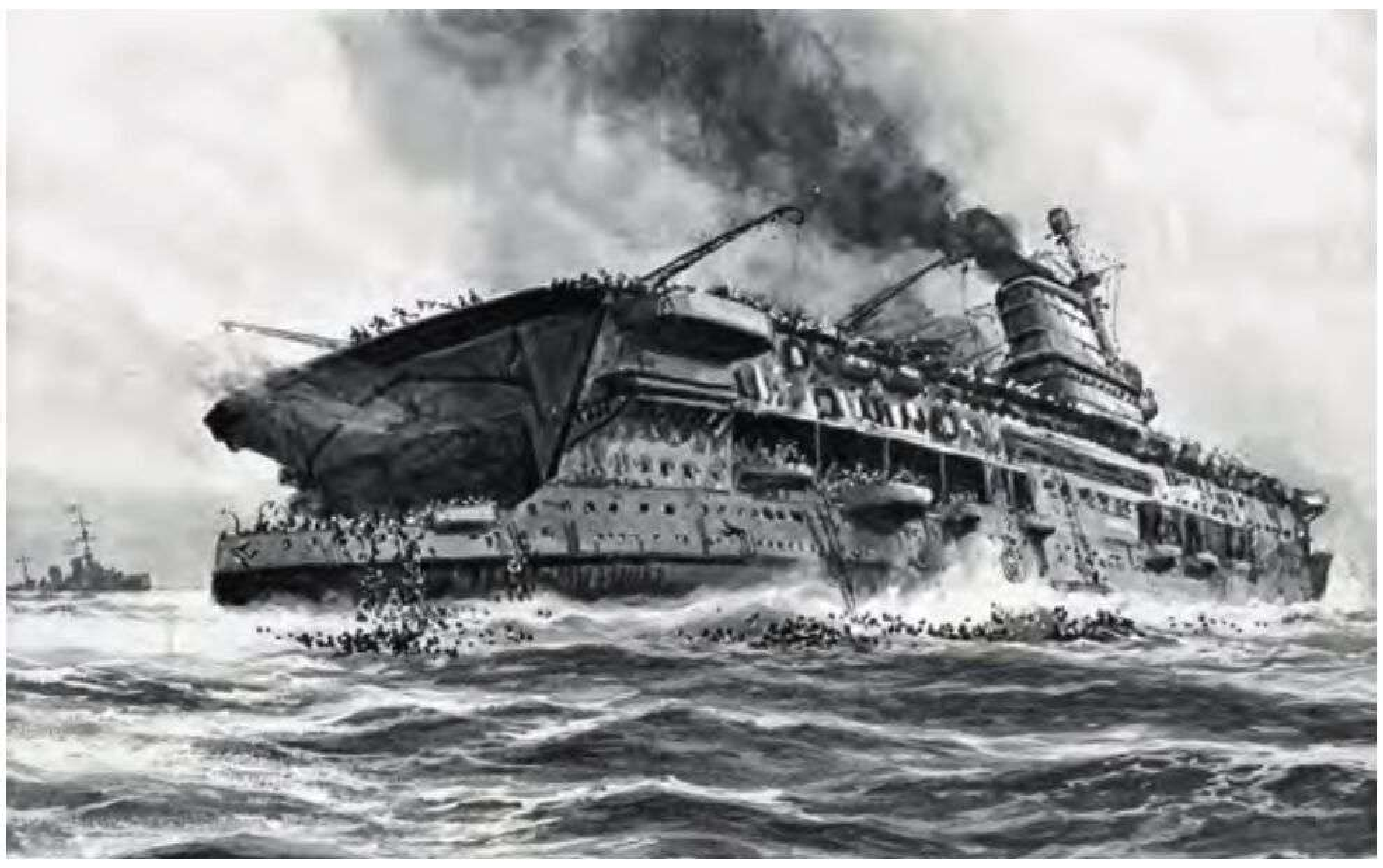
Converted from a cruiser of the same name in the 1920s, by the middle of September 1939 the aircraft carrier HMS *Courageous* had, like HMS *Ark Royal*, been deployed on anti-submarine patrols. On the evening of the 17th, *Courageous*, accompanied by a screen of four Home Fleet destroyers, was patrolling in the South West Approaches when a wireless message was received from the SS *Kafiristan*. In this, the latter reported that she was under attack by a surfaced U-boat.

In an effort to locate the U-boat or *Kafiristan*, *Courageous* despatched two of the escorts and launched a number of her aircraft. Finding nothing, the last plane to return to the aircraft carrier, shortly before 20.00 hours, was that flown by Lieutenant Charles Lamb. It was just as Lamb stepped into the wardroom that disaster struck when two torpedoes fired by the U-boat *U-29* hit the carrier (a third missed).

"If the core of the earth exploded, and the universe split from pole to pole, it could sound no worse," Lamb later recalled in his autobiography, *War in a String Bag*. "Every light went out and the deck read upwards, throwing me backwards, and the hot blast which followed tore at the skin on my face and my clothes. There was something Satanic about it, and unreal. In the sudden deathly silence which followed I knew that the ship had died. In the wardrobe passage the deafening silence was broken by the tinkling of glass, breaking somewhere; and the tiny sound of trickling water… When the torpedoes ripped open the ship's side and she rolled over to port at such an incredible angle it was obvious at once that she had been struck a mortal blow."

Lamb immediately set about abandoning the stricken ship. "The carrier's stern suddenly rose in the air until the ship was vertical," he continued. "The quarterdeck was pointing at the sky and it seemed to be hundreds of feet up. Then she was gone.

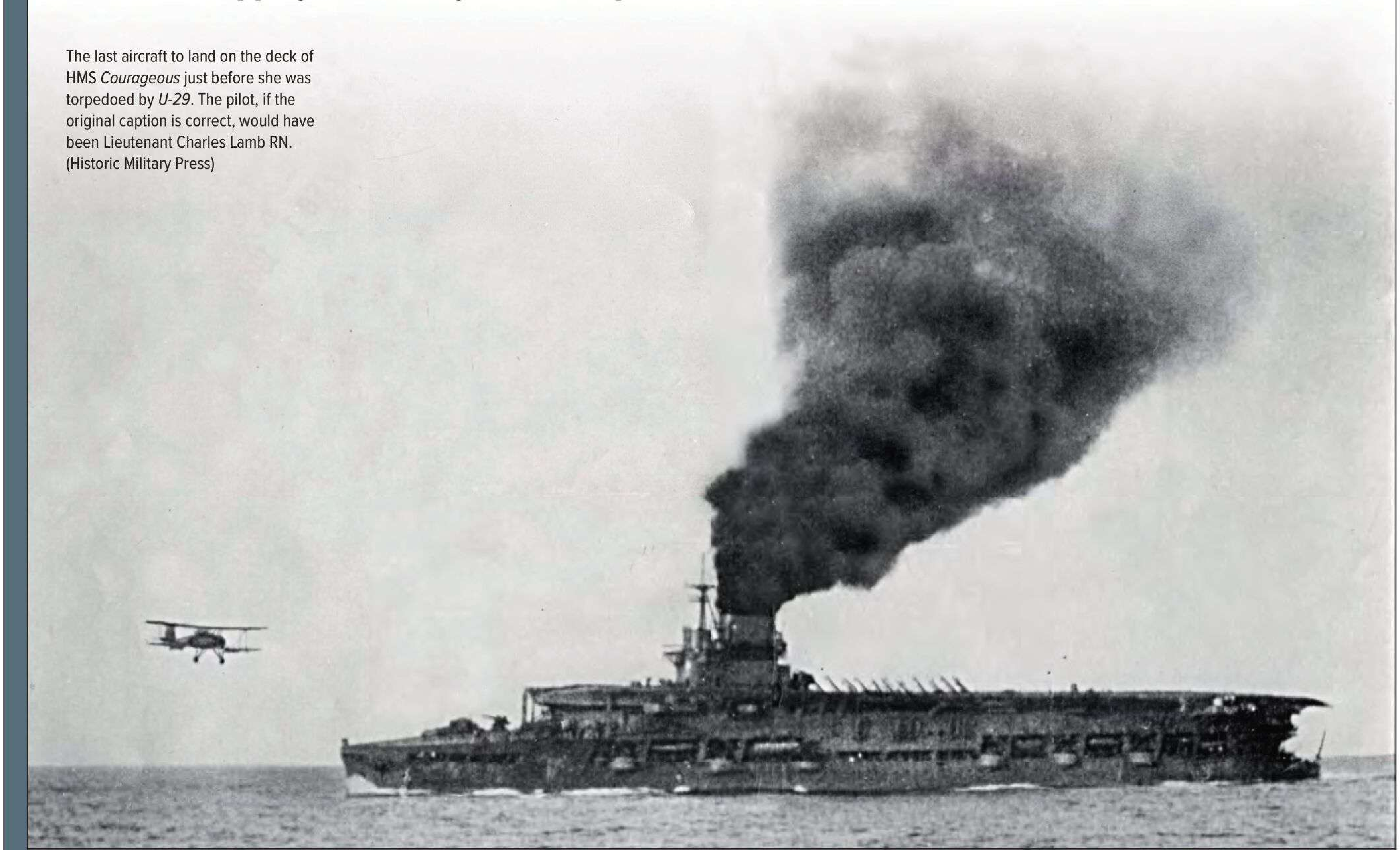
"The sea all round me was a mass of heads, all bobbing about in the calm water. As the ship plunged downwards a great cheer went up from the sea's surface and someone started to sing 'Roll out the Barrel'."



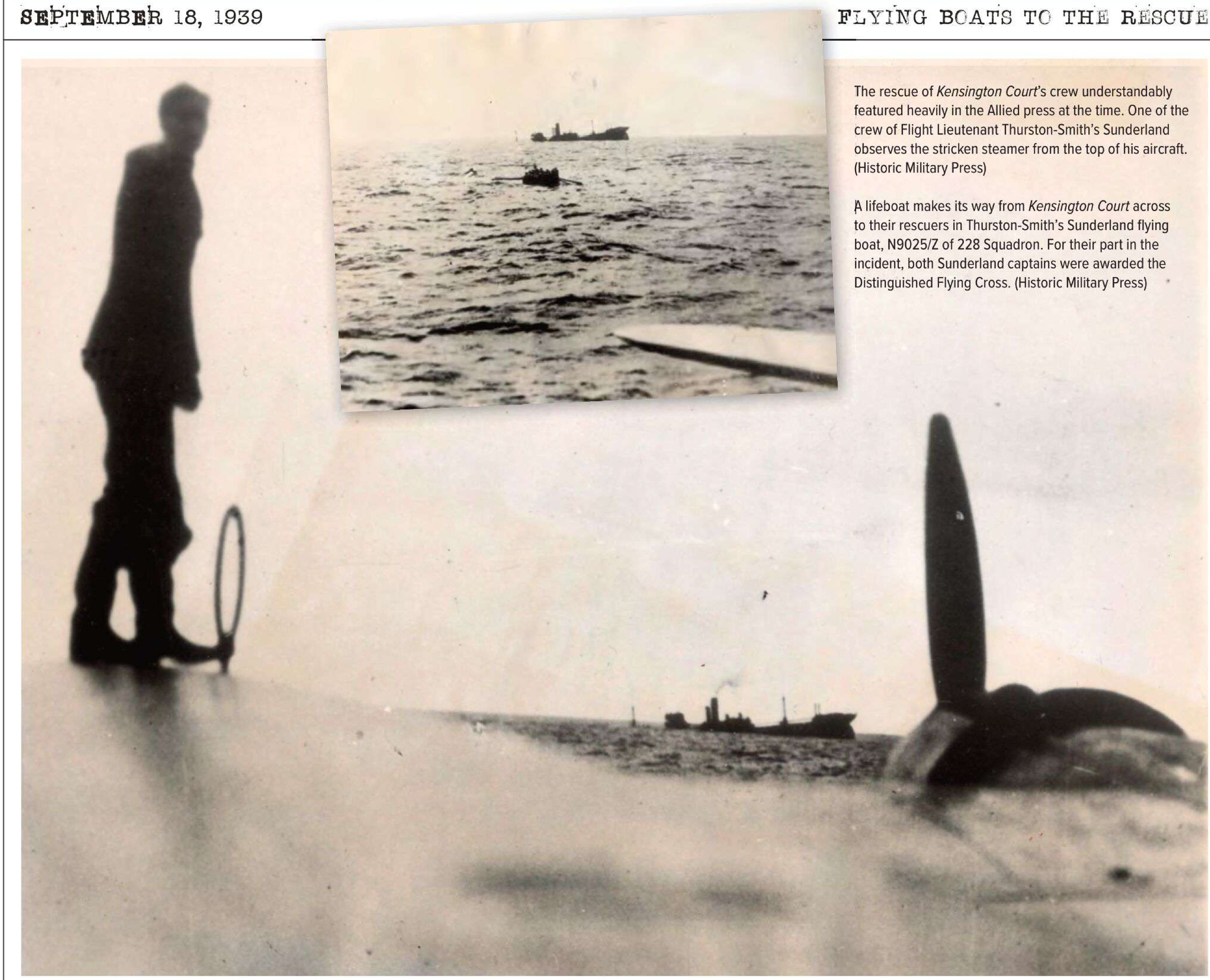
A painting by the German maritime artist Adolf Bock which, dated 1941, depicts the sinking of HMS *Courageous*. (Historic Military Press)

HMS *Courageous* sank in just twenty minutes. She was the Royal Navy's first loss as a result of enemy action in World War Two. Of the 1,200 men on board, 518 lost their lives, including Captain William T Makeig-Jones.

As a consequence of *Courageous*' sinking, and the unsuccessful torpedo attack on HMS *Ark Royal* a few days earlier, the policy of using aircraft carriers for offensive anti-submarine patrols was promptly abandoned for the Royal Navy could ill afford losses on this scale. For its part, *U-29* returned to Wilhelmshaven, and a heroes' welcome, on September 26. Among those on the quayside was Hitler himself, who duly presented the U-boat's commander, Kapitänleutnant Otto Schuhart, with the Iron Cross First Class, and the rest of the crew the Iron Cross Second Class.



The last aircraft to land on the deck of HMS *Courageous* just before she was torpedoed by *U-29*. The pilot, if the original caption is correct, would have been Lieutenant Charles Lamb RN. (Historic Military Press)



The rescue of *Kensington Court*'s crew understandably featured heavily in the Allied press at the time. One of the crew of Flight Lieutenant Thurston-Smith's Sunderland observes the stricken steamer from the top of his aircraft. (Historic Military Press)

A lifeboat makes its way from *Kensington Court* across to their rescuers in Thurston-Smith's Sunderland flying boat, N9025/Z of 228 Squadron. For their part in the incident, both Sunderland captains were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. (Historic Military Press)

FLYING BOATS TO THE RESCUE

Throughout September 1939, many merchant ships opted to sail independently. For some, this would prove a fatal decision – as was the case with the steamer SS *Kensington Court*. Loaded with some 8,000 tons of grain, *Kensington Court* was bound from Rosairo, Argentina, to Birkenhead when, at 12.38 hours on September 18, she strayed into the path of *U-32*. Thirteen rounds from the U-boat's deck gun brought the ship to a halt 70 miles west of the Scillies. Once her crew had abandoned ship, *Kensington Court* was sunk by a coup de grâce at 14.00 hours.

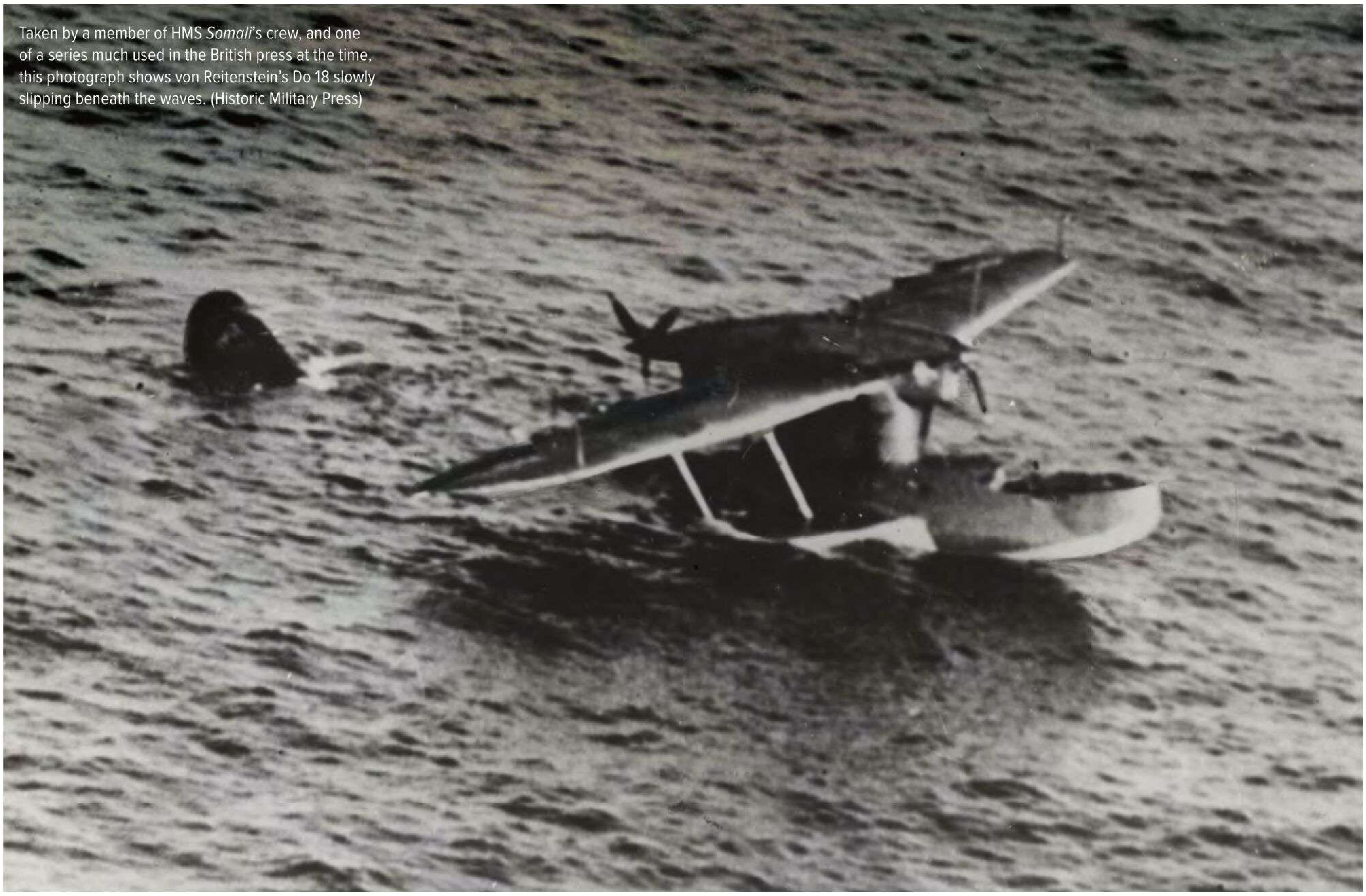
The steamer's wireless room, however, had been able to send out a series of distress signals. These were picked up by a pair of patrolling Short Sunderland flying boats – one apiece from Nos. 204 and 228 squadrons.

The first Sunderland, N9025/Z of 228 Squadron, was on scene just forty minutes later to find *Kensington Court* down by the bows. One of its crew, Pilot Officer (later Group Captain) Bevan-John, recalled the events that followed: "'I was co-pilot to A/F/Lt Thurston-Smith on the 18th and we were returning from an A/S patrol in the SW approaches 9 hrs 50 mins duration when we picked up an SSS [attacked by submarine signal] as it was then. On plotting it I found it was not far from our position, so we altered course and very soon came upon the *Kensington Court* which was well down by the bow and all her crew were in one lifeboat. Having searched for the sub without success we decided to try a landing. It was a lovely day and the sea seemed like a millpond. A/F/Lt Smith made an excellent landing on what turned out to be quite a swell. The lifeboat, which seemed very full came towards us during its passage."

The second Sunderland, that flown by Flying Officer J Barrett of 204 Squadron, then arrived on the scene. "He signalled by Aldis lamp asking if we wished him to land," continued Bevan-John. "We replied that it was up to him as we considered it a risky business. He decided he would – and did. By the time we had picked up the captain and 19 of his crew, we were prepared to take the whole lot had it been necessary but were quite happy that the load was to be shared." Barrett's aircraft rescued the remaining 14 Merchant Navy seamen.

"The take-off was somewhat hairy," concluded Bevan-John, "but again Smithy did a good job. We found that we had landed with our bombs on… we had to jettison them before take-off and, to cap it all, two hung up and had to be pushed off with a boat hook."

As the RAF historian Denis Richards noted, a third Sunderland, L5805 flown by Squadron Leader Menzies of 228 Squadron, then arrived on scene: "[It] sighted the U-boat breaking surface. The flying-boat at once attacked. Unfortunately for the artistic unity of the story, the first bomb hung up, and the enemy escaped by a smart dive."



Taken by a member of HMS *Somali*'s crew, and one of a series much used in the British press at the time, this photograph shows von Reitenstein's Do 18 slowly slipping beneath the waves. (Historic Military Press)

FIRST BLOOD

It was the Royal Navy's S-class submarine HMS *Spearfish* that sparked off the historic events of September 26, 1939. Her wartime career started inauspiciously when she was heavily damaged by German warships off Horns Reef in the North Sea two days earlier. Though she was unable to submerge, *Spearfish* managed to affect an escape.

As soon as the Admiralty was alerted to the submarine's plight, a rescue force sailed towards Heligoland Bight to assist in her recovery. Providing air cover for this small armada was the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*. The Luftwaffe, however, was not slow to respond. For the first time in its service, *Ark Royal* came under air attack.

Following a reconnaissance flight by three Dornier Do 18D flying boats, a force of nine Heinkel He 111s and four Junkers Ju 88s struck at some of the British warships. It was during this action that Unteroffizier Karl Francke was mistakenly credited by the Germans with sinking *Ark Royal* in what was to be the Ju 88's first ever offensive action.

On October 8, 1939, a Do 18B tangled with a Lockheed Hudson Mk.I of 224 Squadron, that flown by Flight Lieutenant A L Womersely, near Jutland. Soon shot down, the despatch of this flying boat marked the first Hudson combat kill, the first recorded victory of an American-built aircraft in World War Two, and the first German aircraft to be destroyed by an RAF aircraft operating from Britain. The Luftwaffe crew was rescued by the Danish fishing vessel *Teddy*. (Historic Military Press)

As well as the bombers, other Luftwaffe aircraft continued to shadow the British vessels. Initial contact was made at 11.00 hours, with one Do 18 being chased by three Blackburn Skuas of the Fleet Air Arm's 803 Naval Air Squadron, which was, at the time, operating from the aircraft carrier itself. The Skuas managed to get close enough to open fire, and are believed to have caused enough damage that the German pilot, unable to reach his base at Borkum Island, was forced to land in Dutch territorial waters.

Some 30 minutes later, another Dornier Do 18D flying boat, this time of 2/Küstenfliegergruppe 506, made the mistake of straying too close to HMS *Ark Royal*. In Luftwaffe service, the Do 18 was already obsolete by the outbreak of World War Two, though a few were used on North Sea reconnaissance missions. It was highly vulnerable to heavily-armed RAF aircraft such as the Short Sunderland and Lockheed Hudson and was soon relegated to the air/sea rescue role.

Piloted by Leutnant zur See Freiherr von Reitenstein, the flying boat was soon intercepted by the Blackburn Skua flown by Lieutenant B S McEwen and his telegraphist/air gunner, Petty Officer Airman B M 'Horse' Seymour. After a brief chase and a skirmish, von Reitenstein was forced by McEwen's fire to land his reasonably intact aircraft on the choppy waters of the North Sea in the area known as the Great Fisher Bank.

Once they had landed, the four-man German crew abandoned their aircraft – two of them taking to a dinghy. Meanwhile, the destroyer HMS *Somali* was soon on scene and rescued the Luftwaffe personnel. Their aircraft, which was still afloat, was sunk by the destroyer's gunfire. Though those involved probably did not realise it at the time, history had been made. This Do 18 was both the first German aircraft to be destroyed by British forces in World War Two and the first Luftwaffe loss in operations against Great Britain.

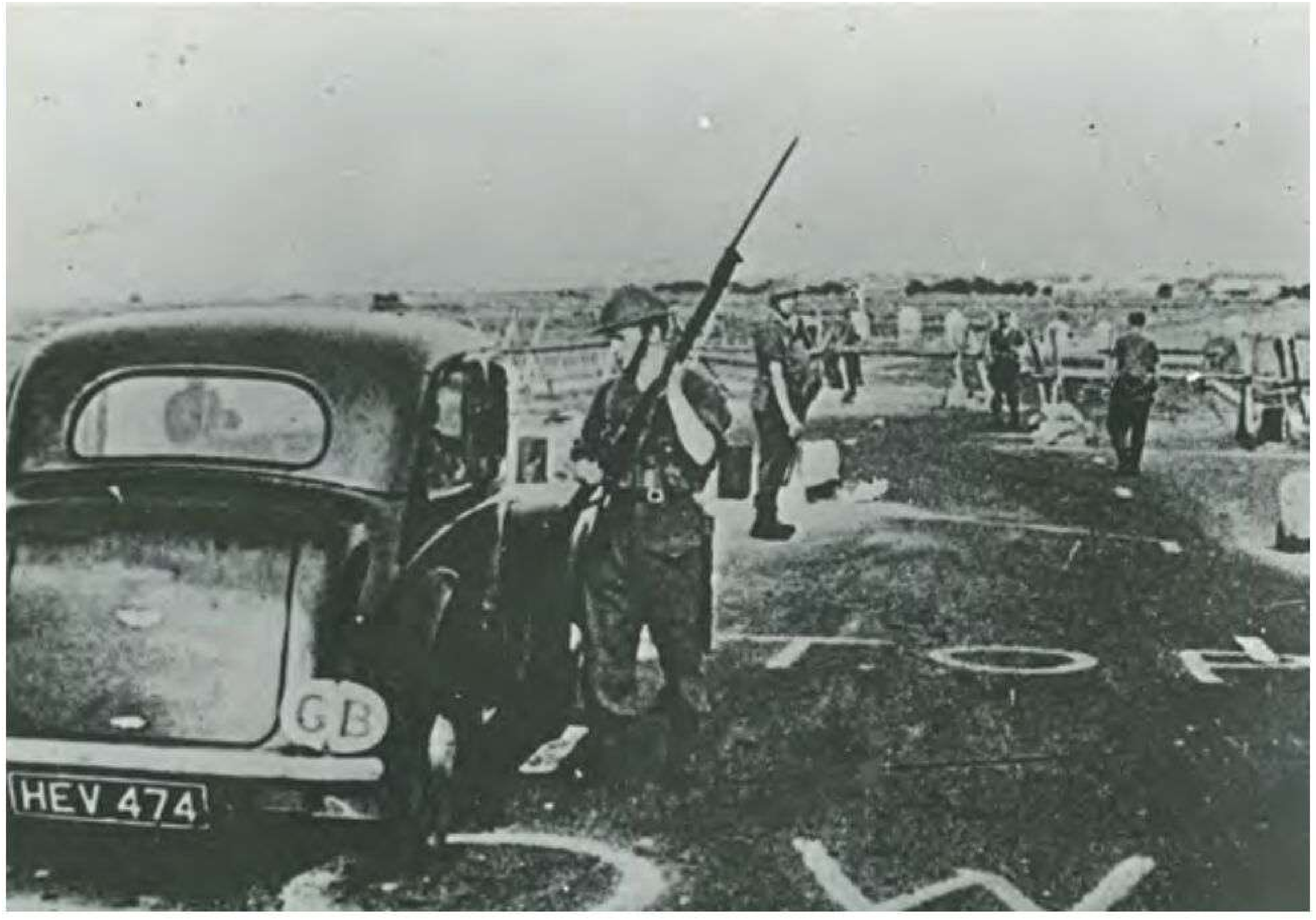
NATIONAL REGISTRATION

Following hard on the heels of the wave of legislation introduced at the end of August and the beginning of September 1939 was the National Registration Act, the main purpose of which was to create a register of all of the UK's citizens. Receiving Royal Assent on the evening of September 5, to many this was the most contentious of the various pieces of wartime legislation seen so far.

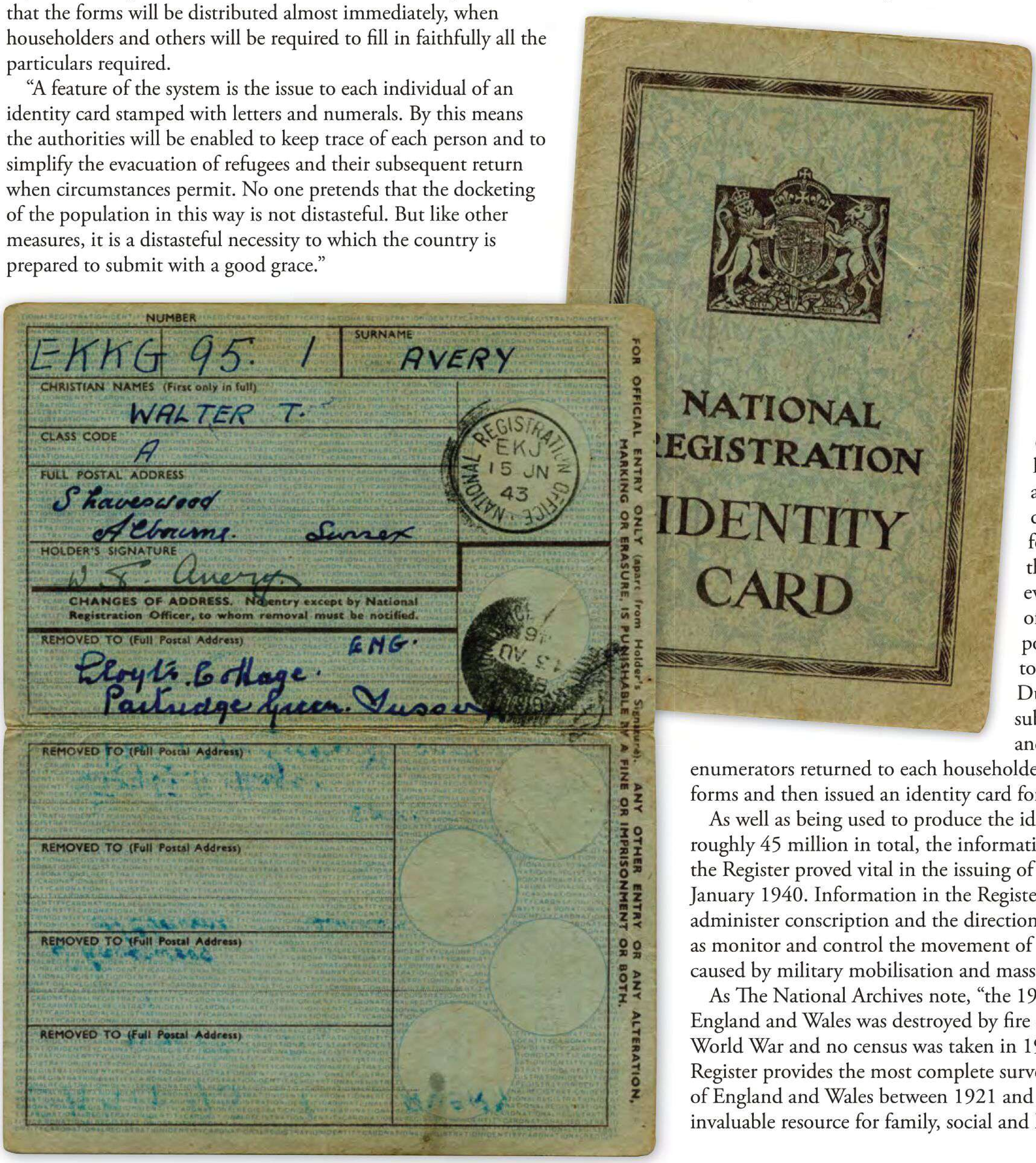
Discussing the new Act in an editorial on September 6, 1939, the *Western Daily Press* noted that its "provisions have long been a subject of acute controversy". However, the article went on to state, "Whatever opposition was formerly offered to a National Register has been dispersed by the outbreak of war. Nobody now disputes the necessity of having up-to-date statistics which will enable the Government to make the best possible use of the available man-power and woman-power, and to avoid confusion and wastage …

"The organisation for carrying out this vital census is already in existence [it would have been the same as that which would have collected the 1941 census had there been no war] and the Government expects to complete the enumeration within twelve days. That means that the forms will be distributed almost immediately, when householders and others will be required to fill in faithfully all the particulars required.

"A feature of the system is the issue to each individual of an identity card stamped with letters and numerals. By this means the authorities will be enabled to keep trace of each person and to simplify the evacuation of refugees and their subsequent return when circumstances permit. No one pretends that the docketing of the population in this way is not distasteful. But like other measures, it is a distasteful necessity to which the country is prepared to submit with a good grace."



British troops manning a roadblock "somewhere on the South Coast" check identity cards during the summer of 1940. (Danish National Library)



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EGISTRATION
IDENTITY
CARD

NUMBER: EKKG 95. 1

SURNAME: AVERY

CHRISTIAN NAMES (First only in full): WALTER T.

CLASS CODE: A

FULL POSTAL ADDRESS: Shaveswood Albourne. Sussex

NATIONAL REGISTRATION OFFICE EKJ 15 JN 43

HOLDER'S SIGNATURE: W. T. Avery

CHANGES OF ADDRESS. No entry except by National Registration Officer, to whom removal must be notified.

REMOVED TO (Full Postal Address): ENG. Lloyds Cottage. Partridge Green. Sussex

REMOVED TO (Full Postal Address)

REMOVED TO (Full Postal Address)

REMOVED TO (Full Postal Address)

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FOR OFFICIAL ENTRY ONLY (apart from Holder's Signature). ANY OTHER ENTRY OR ANY ALTERATION, MARKING OR ERASURE, IS PUNISHABLE BY A FINE OR IMPRISONMENT OR BOTH.

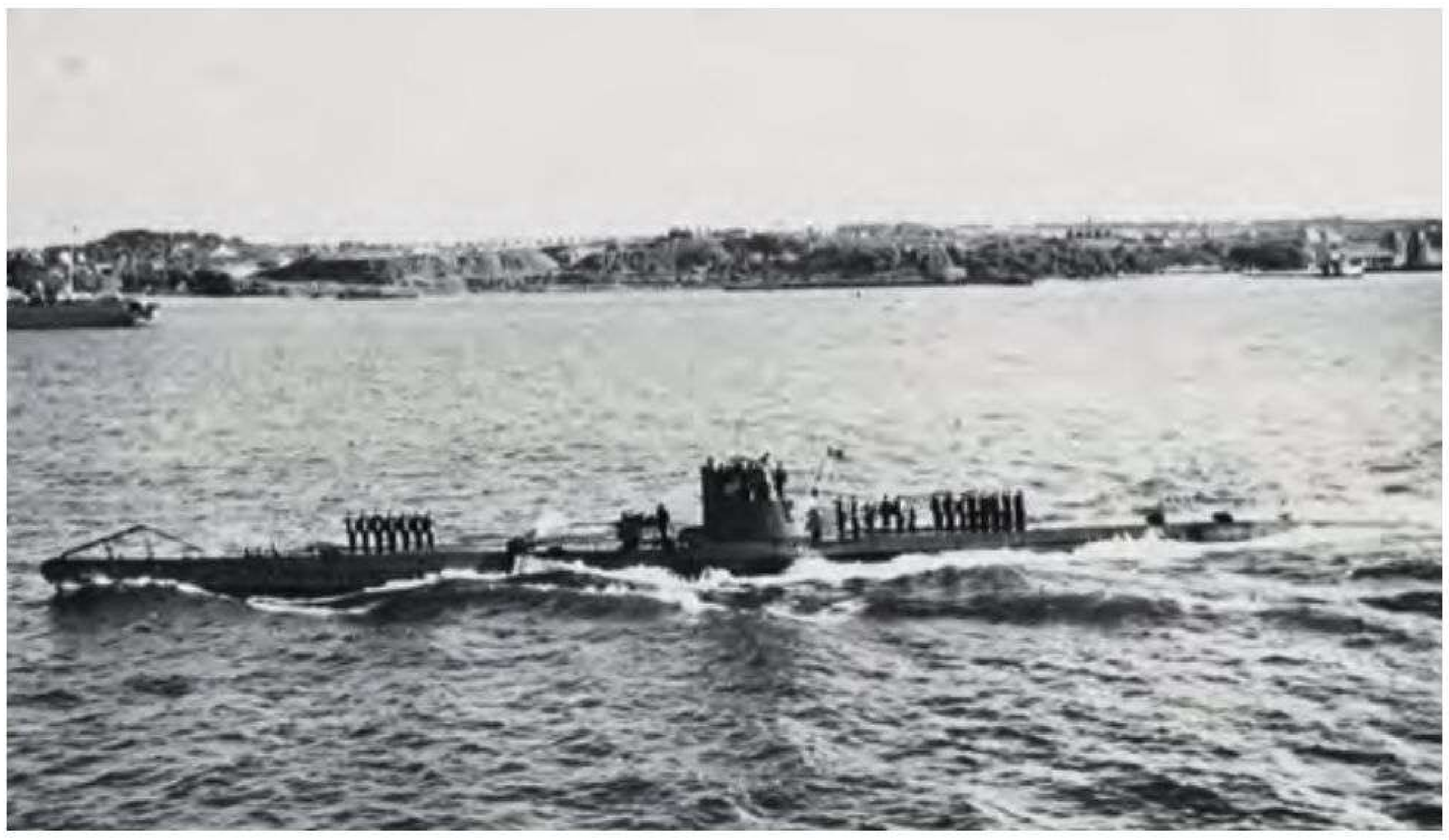
An Identity Card that was introduced by the National Registration Act, in this case an example of those issued from 1943 onwards. (James Luto Collection)

The date chosen for the Register to be completed was Friday, September 29. Prior to then an army of 65,000 enumerators had spread out across the country delivering the forms on which the details of every member of the civilian population were to be recorded. During the subsequent Sunday and Monday, the enumerators returned to each householder, checked the forms and then issued an identity card for every resident.

As well as being used to produce the identity cards, roughly 45 million in total, the information gathered by the Register proved vital in the issuing of ration books from January 1940. Information in the Register was also used to administer conscription and the direction of labour, as well as monitor and control the movement of the population caused by military mobilisation and mass evacuation.

As The National Archives note, "the 1931 census for England and Wales was destroyed by fire during the Second World War and no census was taken in 1941, [so] the Register provides the most complete survey of the population of England and Wales between 1921 and 1951, making it an invaluable resource for family, social and local historians".

Following the patrol in which she torpedoed HMS *Royal Oak*, *U-47* is pictured here arriving back at Kiel on October 23, 1939. The battleship *Scharnhorst* is in the background. (USNHHC)



With her crew on deck, *U-47* is pictured returning to Kiel in late 1939 or early 1940. Note the insignia on the submarine's conning tower, which looks very much like *U-47*'s distinctive 'Bull of Scapa Flow' emblem. (USNHHC)

On the night of October 13/14, 1939, the Type VIIB U-boat *U-47*, on its second War Patrol, carried out one of the most audacious attacks in the history of submarine warfare. Under the command of Kapitänleutnant Günther Prien, *U-47* penetrated the Royal Navy's base at Scapa Flow, which had long been considered impregnable to enemy submarines, and sank the British battleship HMS *Royal Oak*.

It was at 23.31 hours on the 13th that *U-47* surfaced and began edging its way into Holm Sound at the eastern side of Scapa Flow. Remaining on the surface throughout, the U-boat probed deeper into the anchorage hoping to locate elements of the Home Fleet. Finally, at 00.55 hours, two targets were sighted. The one nearest *U-47* was the battleship HMS *Royal Oak*.

At 01.00 hours, whilst still on the surface, a salvo of four torpedoes were ordered to be fired from all four of *U-47*'s bow tubes. One misfired, so only three were actually sent on their way. One torpedo detonated on the starboard side of HMS *Royal Oak*, on her starboard bow near the anchor chains, tearing a hole below the waterline. The other two torpedoes missed.

Prien ordered his crew to pull the U-boat away to the south and reload more torpedoes. With the task complete, the still-surfaced submarine crept back towards *Royal Oak*. Three more torpedoes were fired at 01.13 hours – the first struck the battleship three minutes later, followed moments after by the other two. HMS *Royal Oak* immediately began to list to starboard.

Ordinary Seaman Vincent Marchant was asleep in his hammock when *U-47*'s first torpedoes exploded: "I ran to the upper deck to see what happened. There was a second explosion twenty minutes later, followed by a third and then a fourth. By that time, the ship was tilting. She was sinking rapidly.

"Remembering what happened on the *Courageous*, and the lesson that taught us, I stripped myself of all my clothing and, tying my safety belt around my waist, dived into the water. Searchlights were playing over the surface and I could see hundreds of heads bobbing around. Great volumes of oil started to belch up to the surface. My eyes started to smart and the faces of all the men swimming in the water turned a greasy black. I was caught in a searchlight for several minutes and saw that two of my pals were swimming alongside me. Later, however, they had cramp and disappeared.

DISASTER AT SCAPA FLOW

The fourth of her class, the Revenge-class battleship HMS *Royal Oak* was laid down at Devonport Dockyard in January 1914. Completed in 1916, *Royal Oak* first saw action at the Battle of Jutland. (Historic Military Press)

The site of the wreck of HMS *Royal Oak* at Scapa Flow – the buoy that marks the spot can be seen just to the right of centre of the image. At 140 square miles, with a sandy bottom, and relatively shallow, it is one of the great natural harbours and anchorages of the world. (Courtesy of John Haslam)

"A small boat passed near at hand with someone on board shouting for survivors. I 'ahoyed', but they evidently did not hear me and the boat disappeared into the darkness. I swam and swam for I don't know how long, but I must have gone about a mile and a half when I felt the rock under me. I scarcely remember what happened after that. It was like a nightmare.

"I have just a vague recollection of climbing up the sheer face of a cliff about 20 to 30 feet high. Another figure was climbing behind me, but he slipped and crashed among the rocks below. He must have been killed or drowned. I lay down on top of the cliff and lost consciousness. Then I heard someone shouting from the direction of the sea. They told me not to try to climb down again as they would send someone along the top of the cliff."

Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant Gilbert Harrison later recalled how he also became one of the survivors. His birthday was just 58 minutes old when the first explosion occurred: "I was in the mess at two minutes to one when I heard a minor explosion. I was just about to open a parcel from my wife – a birthday present – but I replaced the string and went up on deck.

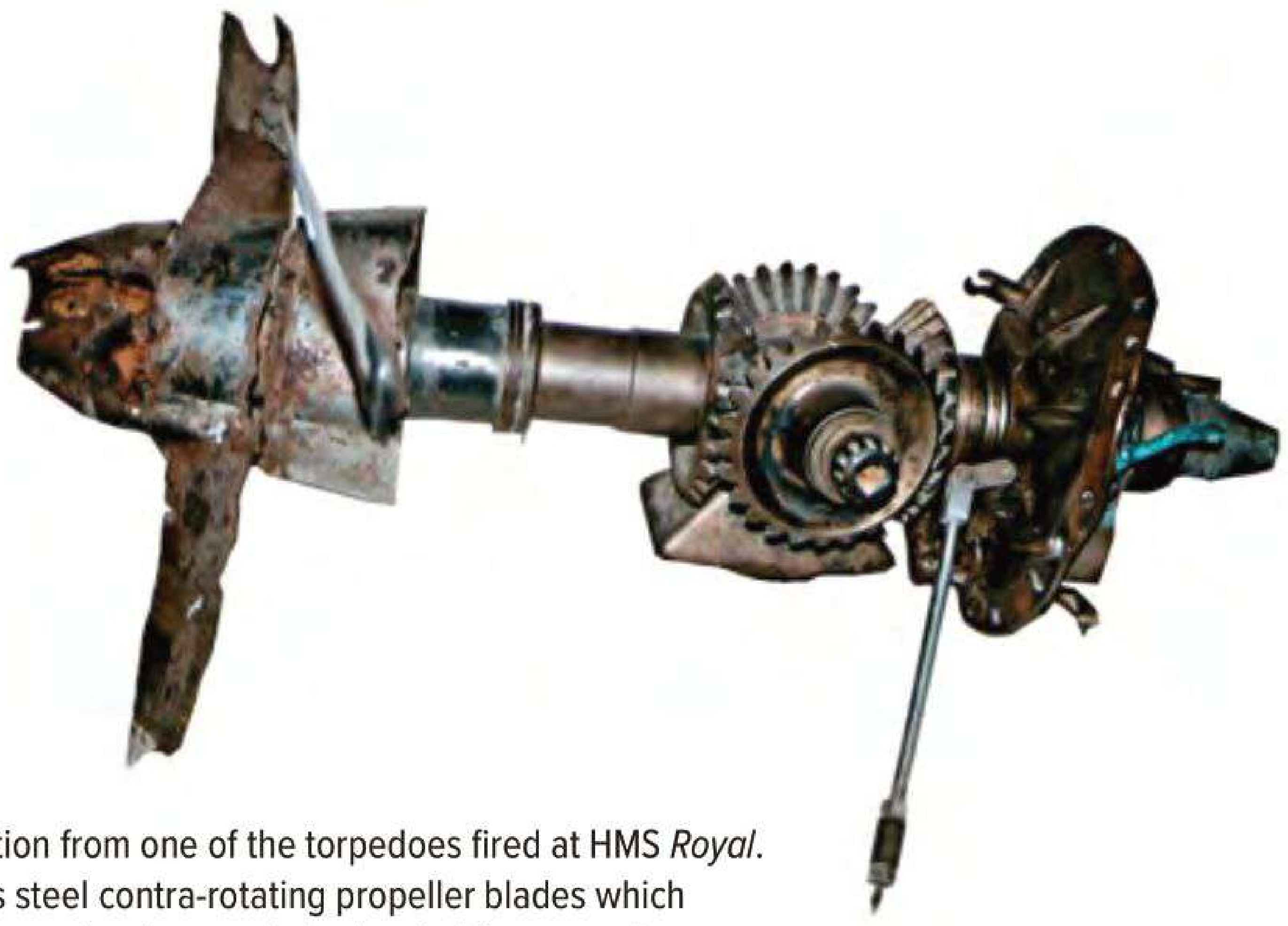
"Three minutes after I left the mess there was a violent explosion. I was pitched forward. Then there came another explosion. I joined a queue and was making to go overboard on the port side when there came a fourth explosion. I managed to get to a canvas lifeboat, but after I had clung to it for a while another poor fellow arrived almost exhausted. I hoisted him into my grip on the boat and swam away. A piece of wreckage came along and I used it for swimming support. Later I bumped into a log, and with wood support under both arms I swam to a drifter and was taken aboard."

At 01.29 hours *Royal Oak* rolled over and sank. Some 833 men were lost in the disaster, over 100 of the dead were boy seamen. Having only recently taken up the post of First Lord of the Admiralty, during a speech in the House of Commons on October 17, Winston Churchill gave the following briefing: "The battleship *Royal Oak* was sunk at anchor by a U-boat in Scapa Flow at approximately 1.30 a.m. on the 14th instant. It is still a matter of conjecture how the U-boat penetrated the defences of the harbour. When we consider that during the whole course of the last war this anchorage was found to be immune from such attacks, on account of the obstacles imposed by the currents and the net barrages, this entry by a U-boat must be considered as a remarkable exploit of professional skill and daring…

"It appears probable that the U-boat fired a salvo of torpedoes at the *Royal Oak*, of which only one hit the bow. This muffled explosion was at the time attributed to internal causes, and what is called the inflammable store, where the kerosene and other such materials are kept, was flooded. Twenty minutes later the U-boat fired three or four torpedoes, and these striking in quick succession caused the ship to capsize and sink. She was lying at the extreme end of the harbour, and, therefore, many officers and men were drowned before rescue could be organised from other vessels."

Prien and his crew arrived back at Wilhelmshaven on October 23, unsurprisingly to a hero's welcome. During a lavish celebration in Berlin, the crew members of *U-47* were received by Hitler. Each man was decorated, and for his part in the attack Prien received the Knight's Cross, becoming the first U-boat crewman and only the second member of the Kriegsmarine to receive this decoration.

Kapitänleutnant Günther Prien pictured in 1940 on his return from a War Patrol. After sinking *Royal Oak*, both Prien and his famous U-boat were known thereafter as the 'Bull of Scapa Flow'. He remained commander of *U-47* throughout his operational career, during which he sank a total of thirty merchant ships. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-2006-1130-500/Schulze, Annelise/CC-BY-SA 3.0)



The end section from one of the torpedoes fired at HMS *Royal*. The stainless steel contra-rotating propeller blades which propelled the warhead towards the battleship are on the left-hand side while the gear mechanism is on the right. It is on display at the Stromness Museum. (Courtesy of Robert Mitchell)

THE HUMBIE HEINKEL

On October 16, 1939, Flight Lieutenant George Pinkerton, leading a patrol of three Spitfires from 602 (County of Glasgow) Squadron, intercepted and inconclusively attacked a Heinkel He 111 which was attacking warships at Rosyth. In doing so, it is stated that he fired the first shots of the war in the skies over Great Britain. Following this victory, the Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command, Air Marshal Hugh Dowding, sent word to 602 Squadron: "Well done, first blood to the auxiliaries."

Before the month was out, the squadron would be involved in the shooting down of the first enemy aircraft on mainland Britain during World War Two. On that occasion, it was a fellow Spitfire pilot of 603 (County of Edinburgh) Squadron, Flying Officer Archie McKellar, who was credited with the 'kill'.

The victim, a He 111 H-2 of Stab/Kampfgeschwader 26, that coded 1H+JA and with the werke nummer 5449, had been on a reconnaissance flight when it was intercepted. McKellar had been patrolling the Turnhouse area at 16,000ft when he noticed anti-aircraft to the north of his position. His combat report details a little of what followed: "Saw 1 a/c [aircraft] heading S.E. at 14000ft approx. Being doubtful of identity asked T'house for information. Put section into dive astern, full boost & followed. Identified at hostile.

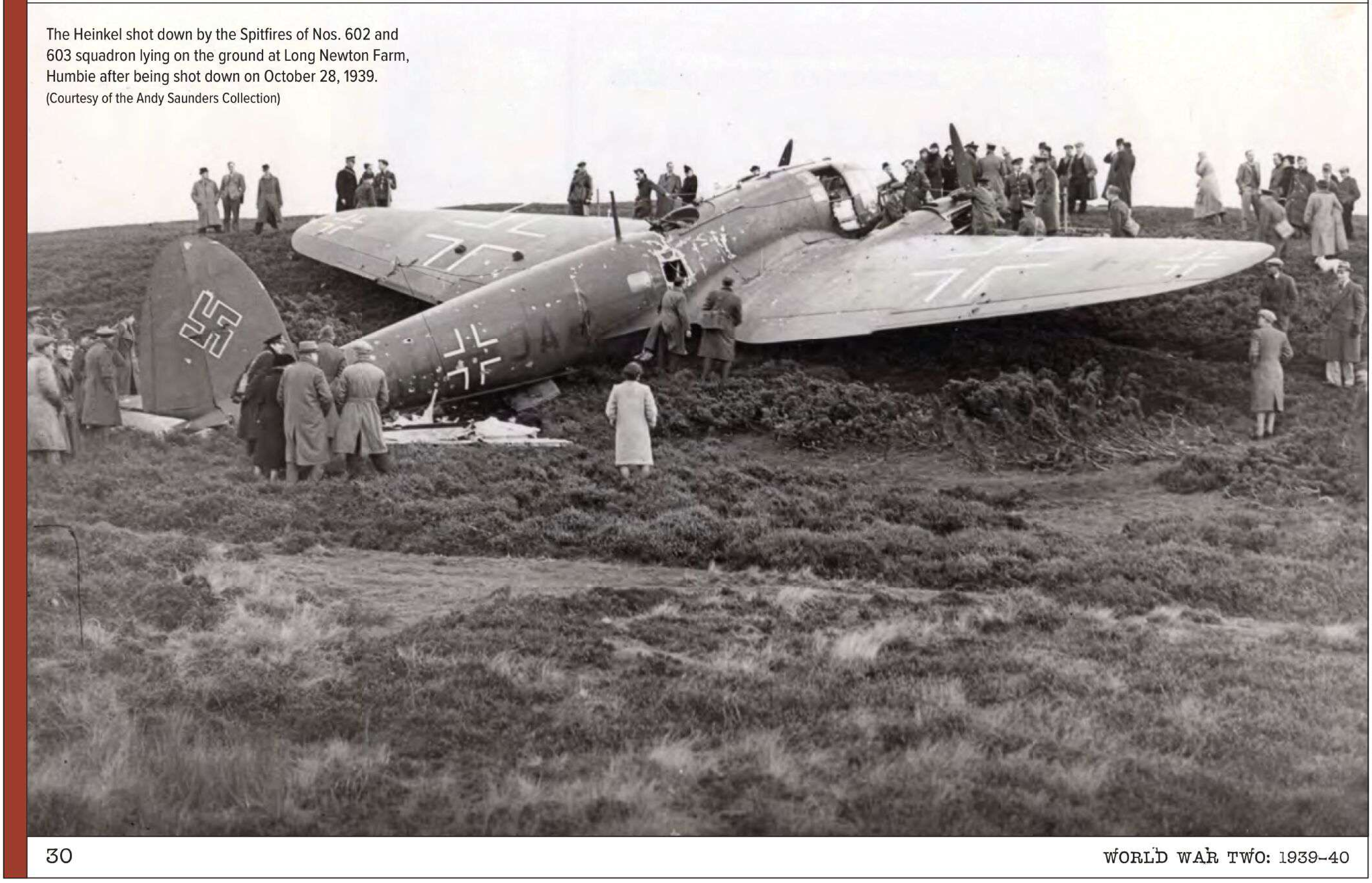
"Carried out No.2 attack, my No.2 followed with No.1 attack. E/A [enemy aircraft] dodged into cloud & I followed him. He appeared again when I and No.2 attacked. Noticed port engine disabled with smoke rising. Machine started to circle. Reported to T'house E/A appeared to be going down. Three other Spitfires [from 602 Squadron] then came in & attacked."

A number of witnesses on the ground later described seeing the stricken bomber's last few moments. The following account from an unidentified hotelier is quoted from the Imperial War Museum's website: "Just after breakfast I had gone up to our bedroom to get some papers I needed when a sudden loud noise like the ripping of calico startled me, and I sprang to the window. I was in time to see the back end of a large plane at hedge height gliding rapidly in the direction of Humbie. Then there were noises of crashing and bumping."

A crowd of onlookers has gathered beside the wreckage of 'the Humbie Heinkel'. Note the damage to the fuselage from the crash. (Critical Past)

The Heinkel crashed at Long Newton Farm, Humbie. Heading off by car, the same witness soon arrived at the crash site. "By then… a little crowd of 2-3 dozen were ambling curiously around the machine, now under the guard of 3 policemen; a Spitfire continually dived and circled overhead… The bodies of two Germans had been removed, and two survivors marched off under escort."

The two survivors were the Heinkel's pilot, Unteroffizier Kurt Lehmkuhl, and navigator, Leutnant Rolf Niehoff, though both men were injured – Lehmkul was hit in the back by machine-gun fire during the engagement with the Spitfires, while Niehoff suffered a fractured spine during the crash-landing. The two gunners, Unteroffizier Gottlieb Kowalke and Gefreiter Bruno Reimann, were killed.



The Heinkel shot down by the Spitfires of Nos. 602 and 603 squadron lying on the ground at Long Newton Farm, Humbie after being shot down on October 28, 1939. (Courtesy of the Andy Saunders Collection)

RAF'S FIRST VICTORY OVER FRANCE

Pilot Officer P W O Mould photographed just after returning to Berry-au-Bac having shot down two German aircraft east of Vouziers. Mould left France with seven confirmed victories and in 1941 was posted to Malta, where he eventually assumed command of 185 Squadron. He was killed in action on October 1, 1941. (via Historic Military Press)

At the same time that the BEF was starting to move its men and equipment to the Continent, the RAF was also deploying some of its resources to France in the form of the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF). Commanded by Air Vice Marshal P H L Playfair, and initially consisting of 12 squadrons, 10 of which were equipped with Fairey Battle light bombers and two with Hawker Hurricanes, the AASF began to cross the Channel on September 2, 1939.

The first engagement between the AASF and the Luftwaffe took place on September 20, when three Fairey Battles of 88 Squadron were attacked by a trio of Messerschmitt Bf 109s of Jagdgruppe 152 west of Saarbrücken. Two of the Battles were shot down. It would be more than a month before the RAF was able to retaliate.

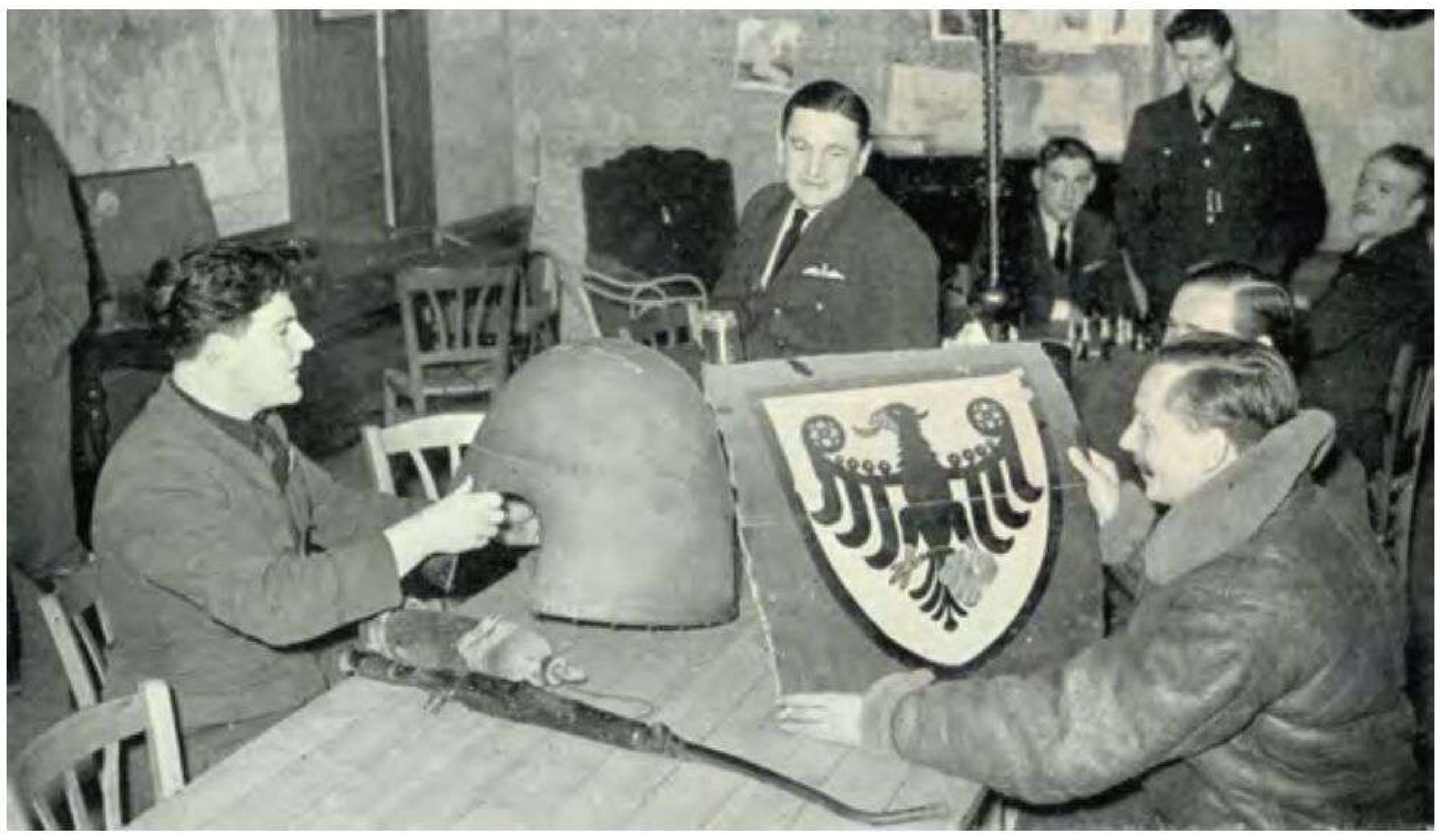
That opportunity arose on the afternoon of October 30. In his history of 1 Squadron, the author Michael Shaw recounts the events that followed: "At 14.30hrs three unidentified aircraft were spotted over Vassincourt at 20,000ft and the aerodrome defence section was scrambled to intercept. As the three possible raiders had split up, the Hurricanes fanned out in pursuit with boost override plugs pulled to achieve the fastest possible climb. The only pilot to make contact was Plt Off 'Boy' Mould, who identified his target as a Dornier 17. He attacked from astern and after a long burst of fire the German aircraft fell in flames. It exploded on striking the ground, killing the entire crew."

The victim of Pilot Officer Peter 'Boy' Mould's interception was a Dornier Do 17P reconnaissance aircraft of 2.(F)/Aufklarungsgruppe 123. Having taken off at 14.00 hours, Mould's claim represented the first enemy aircraft shot down over France by the RAF since 1918.

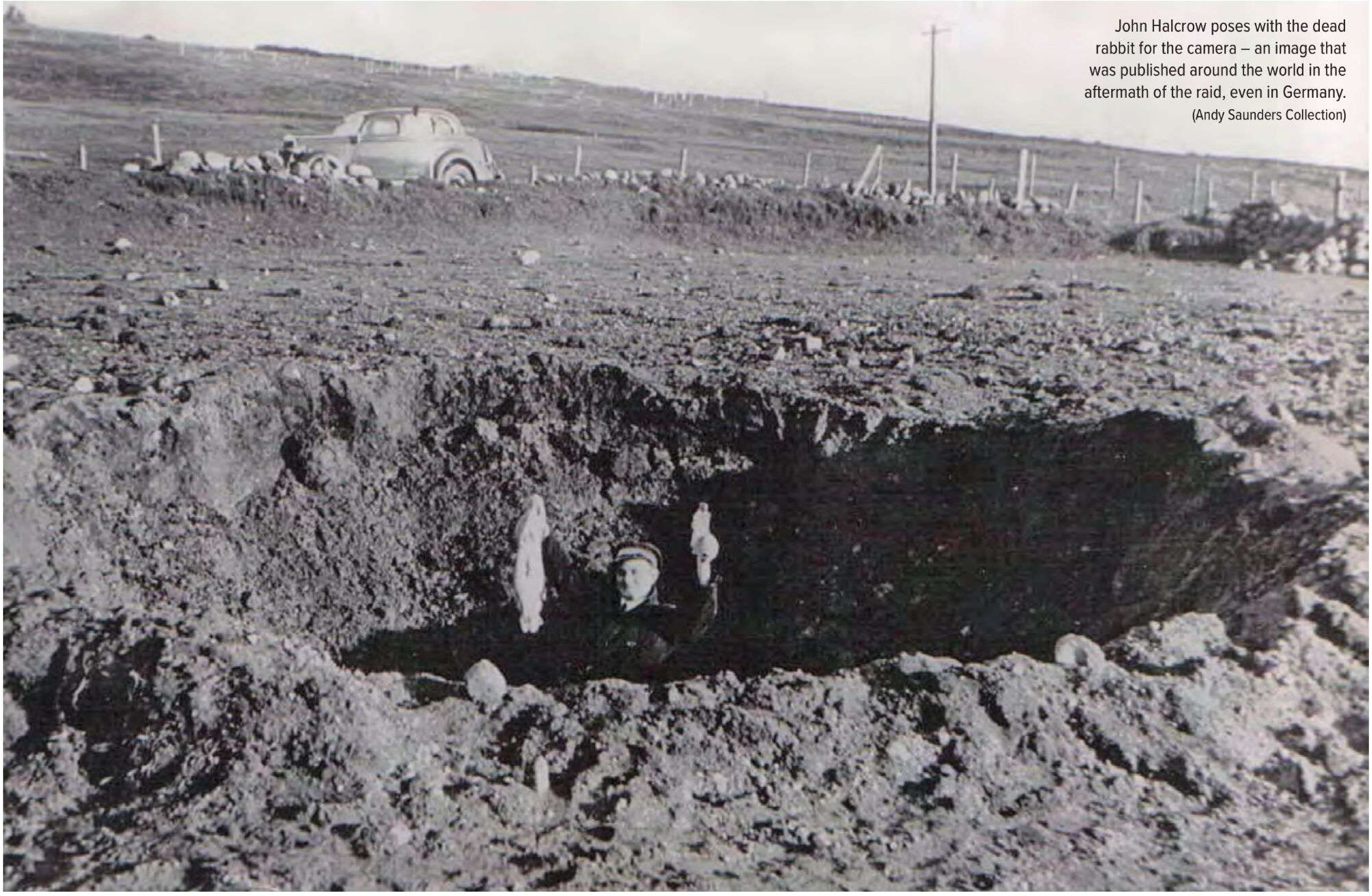
The BBC correspondent Charles Gardner, who was in France reporting on the AASF, later recalled learning of Mould's combat. "On the 1st November we heard about a Dornier 17 being shot down by one of our Hurricanes," he wrote. "Apparently the Hurricanes crept up on the reconnaissancing [*sic*] Dornier and gave it bursts at 200 yards. The Dornier span down, buried itself nine feet deep, and exploded. Those Germans never knew what hit them, and they never even fired one shot back.

"Actually, I think, Mould was the only pilot to open fire, and one burst of four hundred bullets was enough. Next day we went along to No.1 Squadron, which was in a village near Bar-le-Duc. They had managed to salvage relics of the Dornier, including a machine-gun."

The Dornier, coded 4U+BK, crashed near Traveron, some 10 miles east of Toul. All three crew, Hauptmann B von Normann und Audenhove (Staffelkapitän), Oberleutnant H Heisterbergk and Feldwebel F Pfeuffer, were killed.



'Boy' Mould can be seen here, on the left, examining some of the trophies from the Dornier he shot down in the Officers' Mess at Neuville.



John Halcrow poses with the dead rabbit for the camera – an image that was published around the world in the aftermath of the raid, even in Germany. (Andy Saunders Collection)

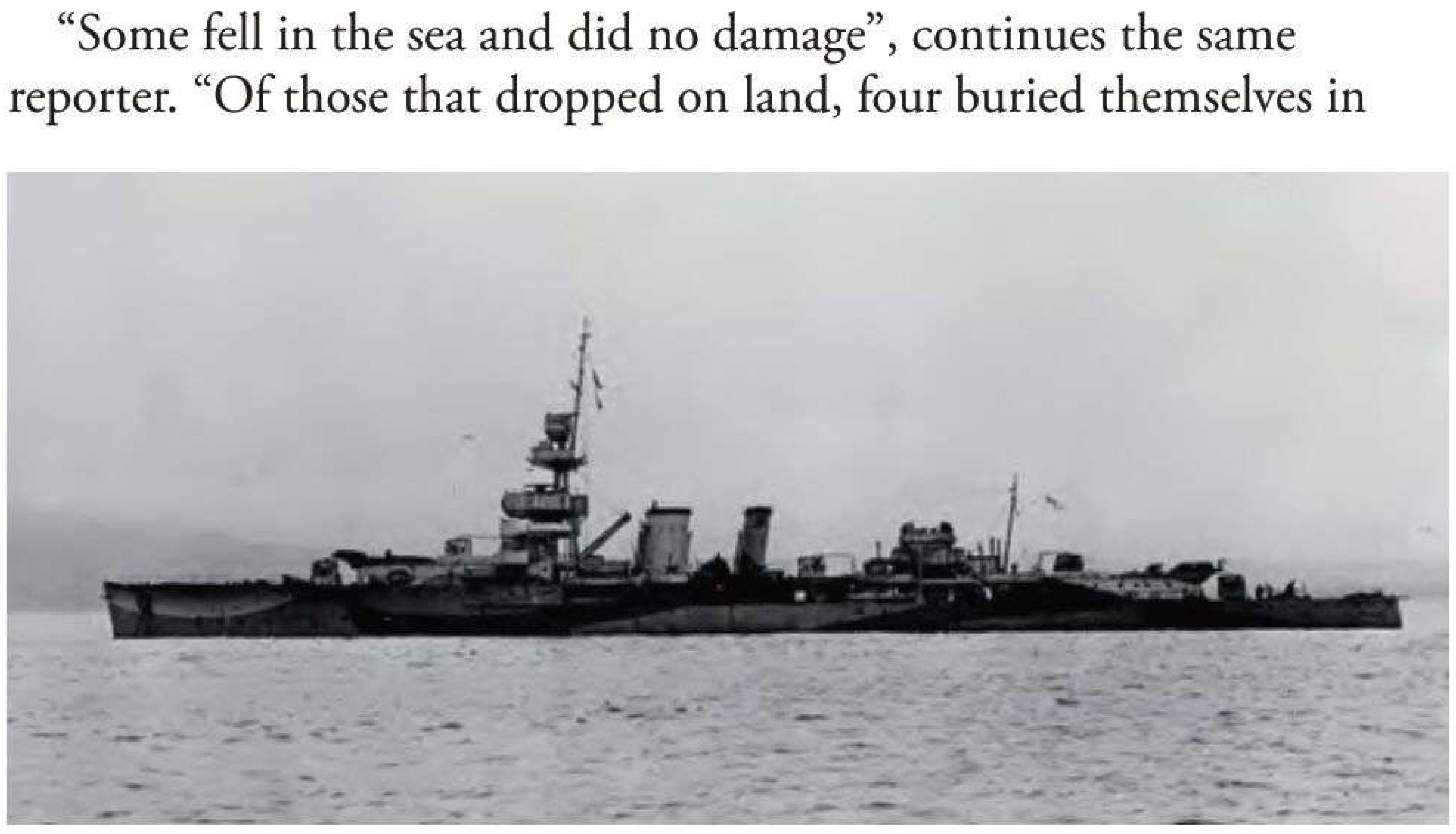
FIRST BOMBS DROPPED ON BRITISH SOIL

It was at about 13.00 hours on the afternoon of Monday, November 13, 1940, when the German bomber was first spotted by some of the residents of the Shetland Isles. Writing an account that was published in the days after the attack, one reporter described the effects of the Luftwaffe's raid in and around the small port of Sullom Voe on the mainland of Shetland:

"Suddenly, out of the haze a German bomber sweeps in from the sea, almost skimming the waves as he comes… Then, at a height of about 1,000 feet, he drops four bombs… he fails to make a hit. At least sixteen bombs – some of them armour-piercing – said to weigh about 250 lbs, were dropped in the raid." These are stated to be the first German bombs to fall on British soil in the Second World War.

"Some fell in the sea and did no damage", continues the same reporter. "Of those that dropped on land, four buried themselves in a deep peat moor and failed to explode and the others, though they made craters up to twenty feet wide and nine or ten feet deep, were equally harmless in their results. Quantities of earth and stones were hurled 150 feet into the air, and as they fell the stones were buried in the ground for several hundred yards around. One 7lb fragment hit a small house 400 yards away. An empty house near the shore had its roof lifted and windows broken. Crofters' houses in the neighbourhood also had their windows broken by the concussion.

"In the village school a young teacher kept her class… singing through the clatter of gunfire and bombs. Fragments from anti-aircraft shells fell round the school, but there were no casualties."



The two cruisers anchored at Sullom Voe, and which may have been the target of the German raiders, have been identified in some accounts as HMS *Cardiff* and HMS *Coventry*. Certainly, *Cardiff*, seen here after the raid, had returned to Sullom Voe, from its sixth patrol, on November 11. (USNHHC)

Following on from an aerial reconnaissance flight that had passed over the islands a few days earlier, the bomber is believed to have been targeting vessels anchored at Sullom Voe. These included two cruisers, a number of cargo ships, and nine flying boats.

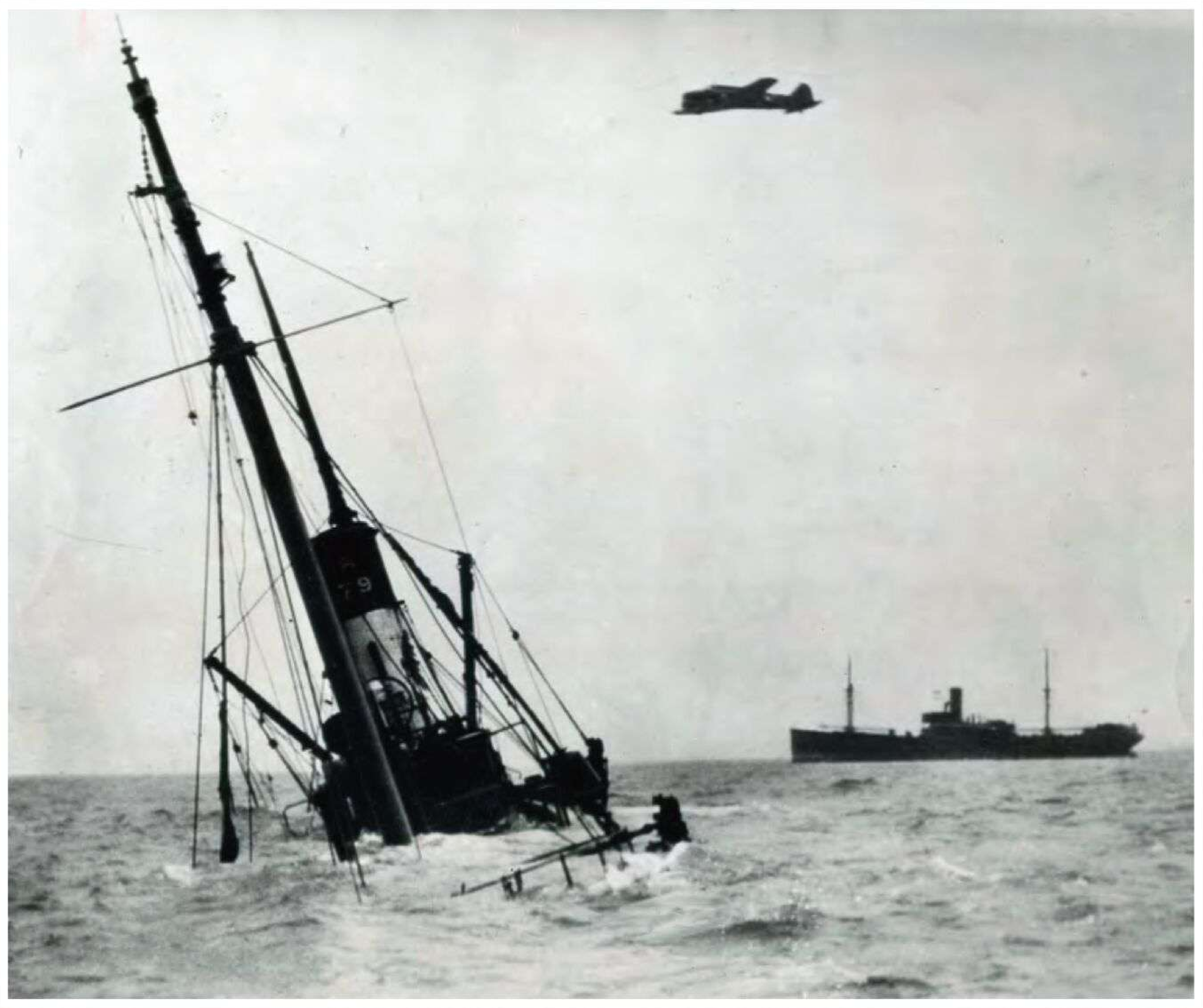
Laurence Shuardson was a young boy when he witnessed the Luftwaffe's attack: "I was on top of a hill at a place called Bobby Ratter Loch, when this black pencil like aircraft came from behind me. As it passed over, the guns started firing from Sullom Voe, the shells were dropping in the sea and exploding in the air. I took fright, ran down the hill to see my friends and told them that I wasn't going to school that day, and then I ran all the way home and hid in a haystack."

Following the raid, a photographer was driven to the area where one bomb landed on open farmland. He duly photographed local man John Halcrow standing in one of the craters holding a dead rabbit. Whilst this was reputedly the only casualty of the bombing, legend has it that the rabbit was actually a gutted specimen purchased from a local butcher, J C Herd in Lerwick.

HMS GIPSY MINED

No sooner had war been declared, then both Britain and Germany began the widespread sowing of conventional sea mines, which exploded on contact, usually in clearly defined minefields. Within weeks, however, the Admiralty became aware that the enemy was also using what was later established to be magnetic mines.

By the middle of November 1939, Luftwaffe mine-laying aircraft were busily operating off the East Coast. As a result of the indiscriminate minelaying, fifteen merchantmen were sunk in four days. Two of the merchantmen were neutrals, the Japanese liner *Terukuni Maru* and the 8,000-ton Dutch liner *Simon Bolivar*, which was blown up south-east of Harwich with the loss of 138 lives.



Conventional sea mines also claimed victims, such as the minesweeper HMS *Aragonite* pictured here sinking after she struck a mine off Deal, Kent, on November 22. In this instance, the mines had been laid by German warships. (Historic Military Press)

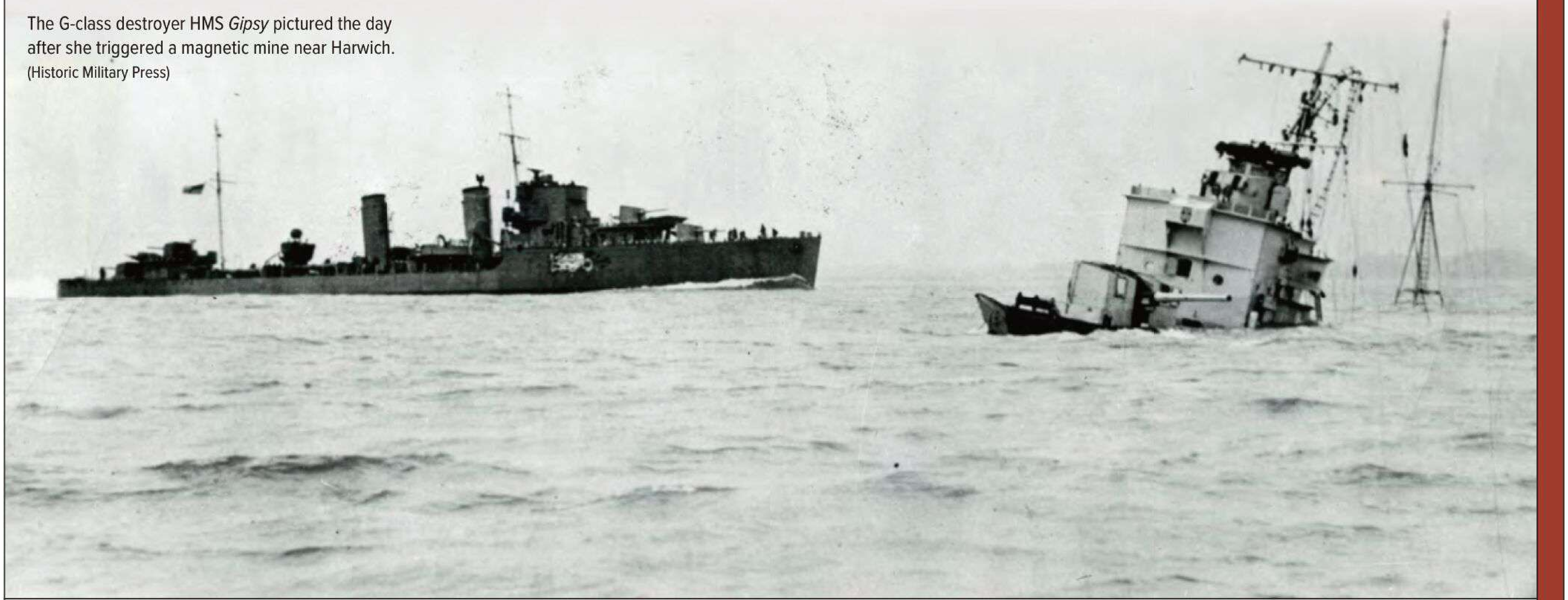
Some of the victims of the mines during this period were Royal Navy vessels. The Town-class light cruiser HMS *Belfast*, which today can be visited on the Thames as a branch of the Imperial War Museum, triggered a magnetic mine in the Firth of Forth on November 21. Along with three other cruisers, *Belfast* had sailed from Rosyth to search for German warships reported on passage to attack convoy traffic in the Atlantic. As she passed through the Firth of Forth, not far from May Island, *Belfast* triggered a magnetic mine. The explosion caused major 'whipping' of the ship's structure and as a result equipment was damaged throughout her length and her back was broken. One crew member was fatally injured.

Another naval casualty that day was the destroyer HMS *Gipsy*. At around 21.00 hours, *Gipsy*, accompanied by four destroyers, had been ordered from Harwich to search for U-boats thought to be minelaying in the North Sea. Just as she got outside the harbour boom disaster struck. Barely hours earlier, a German Heinkel He 59 seaplane had dropped a pair of magnetic mines, one which was triggered by *Gipsy* as she passed overhead

One member of *Gipsy*'s crew later told a reporter that he had been at his post in the engine-room when the explosion occurred. "The next minute I found myself in the water," he said. "How I got there I do not know." Virtually torn in half by the blast, *Gipsy* sank on the edge of Harwich's deep-water channel. Thirty-one men, including the captain, were killed or fatally injured; 115 were rescued by the other destroyers and harbour launches.

Aware of the threat that they posed to Britain's maritime lifelines, the race to beat the magnetic mine was considered to be of national importance. The answer, though, came within a matter of hours of *Gipsy*'s sinking. In the dying hours of November 22, coast watchers observed a Heinkel He 115 drop something by parachute on the mud flats near Shoeburyness. A team led by Lieutenant-Commander J G D Ouvry subsequently defused a pair of unexploded magnetic mines. Within hours of their recovery, the devices had offered up their secrets, valuable information that allowed the Royal Navy and government scientists to develop the equipment which would ultimately help defeat them.

The G-class destroyer HMS *Gipsy* pictured the day after she triggered a magnetic mine near Harwich. (Historic Military Press)



FIRST SOLDIER KILLED IN ACTION

As the BEF consolidated its positions in France, there were calls for the British troops to share the burden of the limited fighting that had broken out in the Saar region. In response to these requests, the 3rd Brigade of the BEF's 1st Division of I Corps was selected to be the first British brigade to go into the famous Maginot Line.

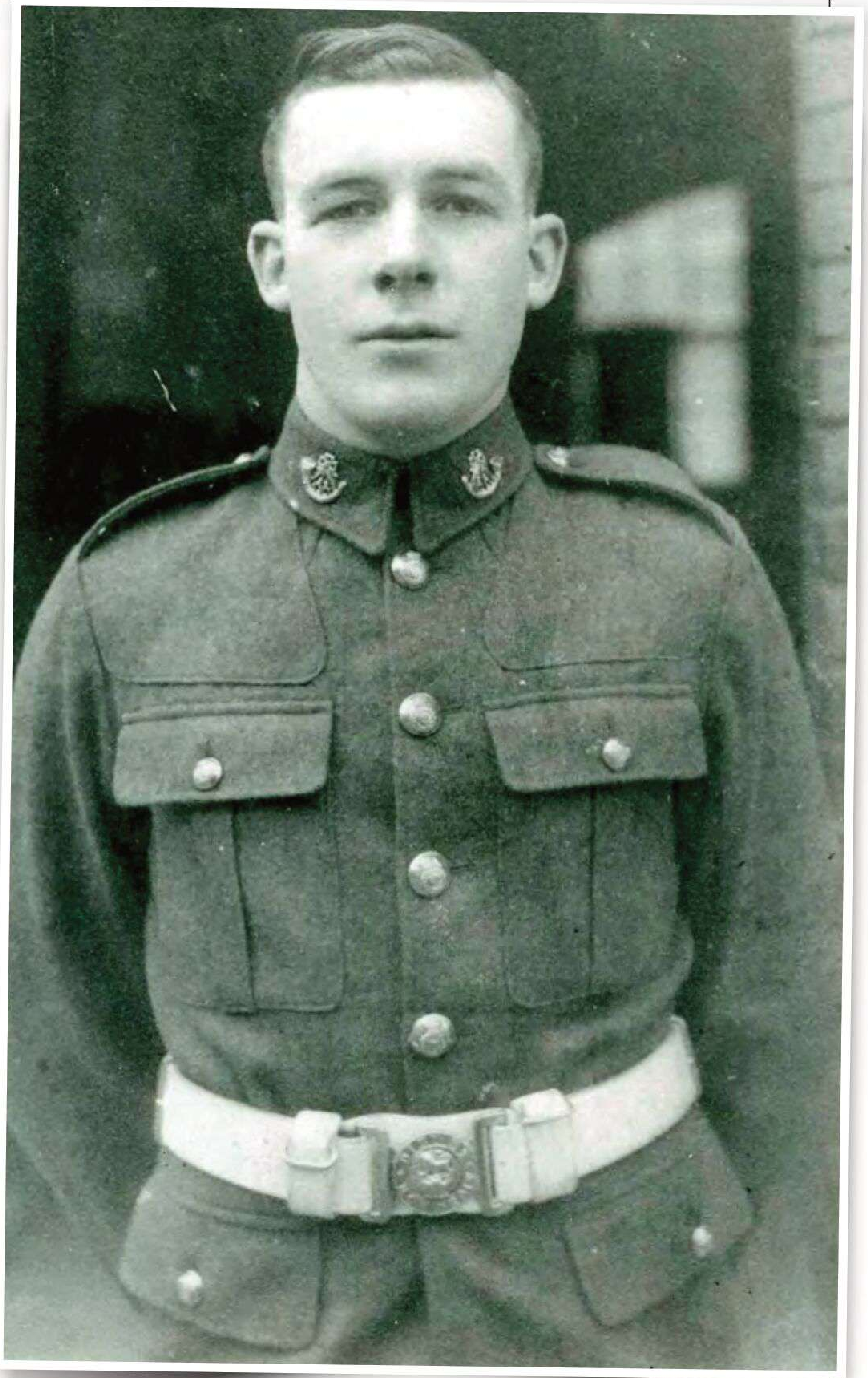
On November 27, 1939, the men of the 1st Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, along with a battalion of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, the 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters and the 3rd Infantry Brigade Anti-Tank Company, were duly transferred to Metz in preparation for moving up to the Maginot Line. The British troops were now in Lorraine and as the Shropshires' commanding officer pointed out to his men, the older Frenchmen in whose farms and houses they were billeted in had served in World War One as conscripts for the German Army.

As soon as they had entered the frontline positions allocated to them, the British battalions started to send out 'battle' patrols at night to engage the German troops opposite. A number of men in each patrol were armed with sub-machine guns, the rest carried grenades, rifles and bludgeons. They blackened their faces, wore cap comforters and long, leather sleeveless Army jerkins. It was, declared one soldier, "like playing Boy Scouts".

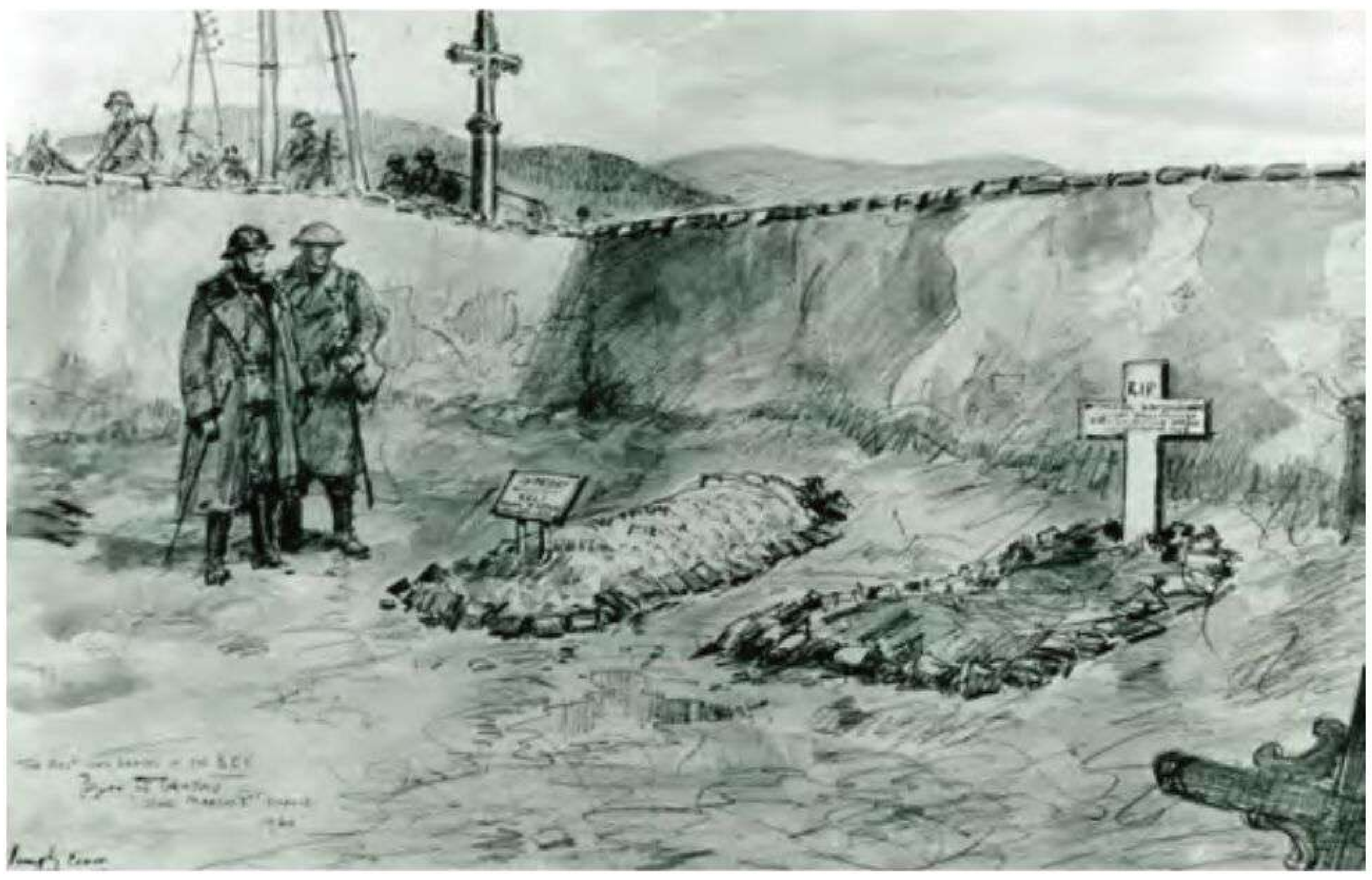
There was, of course, a serious side to this deadly game of patrol and skirmish, trap and ambush, among the deserted houses and empty fields of No Man's Land. It was on one of these patrols that 27-year-old Corporal Thomas William Priday, of the 1st Battalion King's Shropshire Light Infantry, met his death on December 9.

"As soon as dark fell the khaki-clad patrols climbed over the parapet and crawled out through the gaps in the wire into the unknown", revealed one report. "They moved here and there, searched houses and villages whose civilian population had long since been evacuated, ever on the lookout for traces of the passage of their opposite numbers in the German ranks. Always they had to be on the very tip-top of alertness, with hands ready to shoot and eyes keen for the slightest suggestion of a well-placed 'booby trap' such as both sides delighted to plant." Sadly, it was one of those devices, in fact a British booby trap, which detonated and killed Priday near the small village of Monneren. Some accounts state that he was leading a patrol out, others that the men were returning.

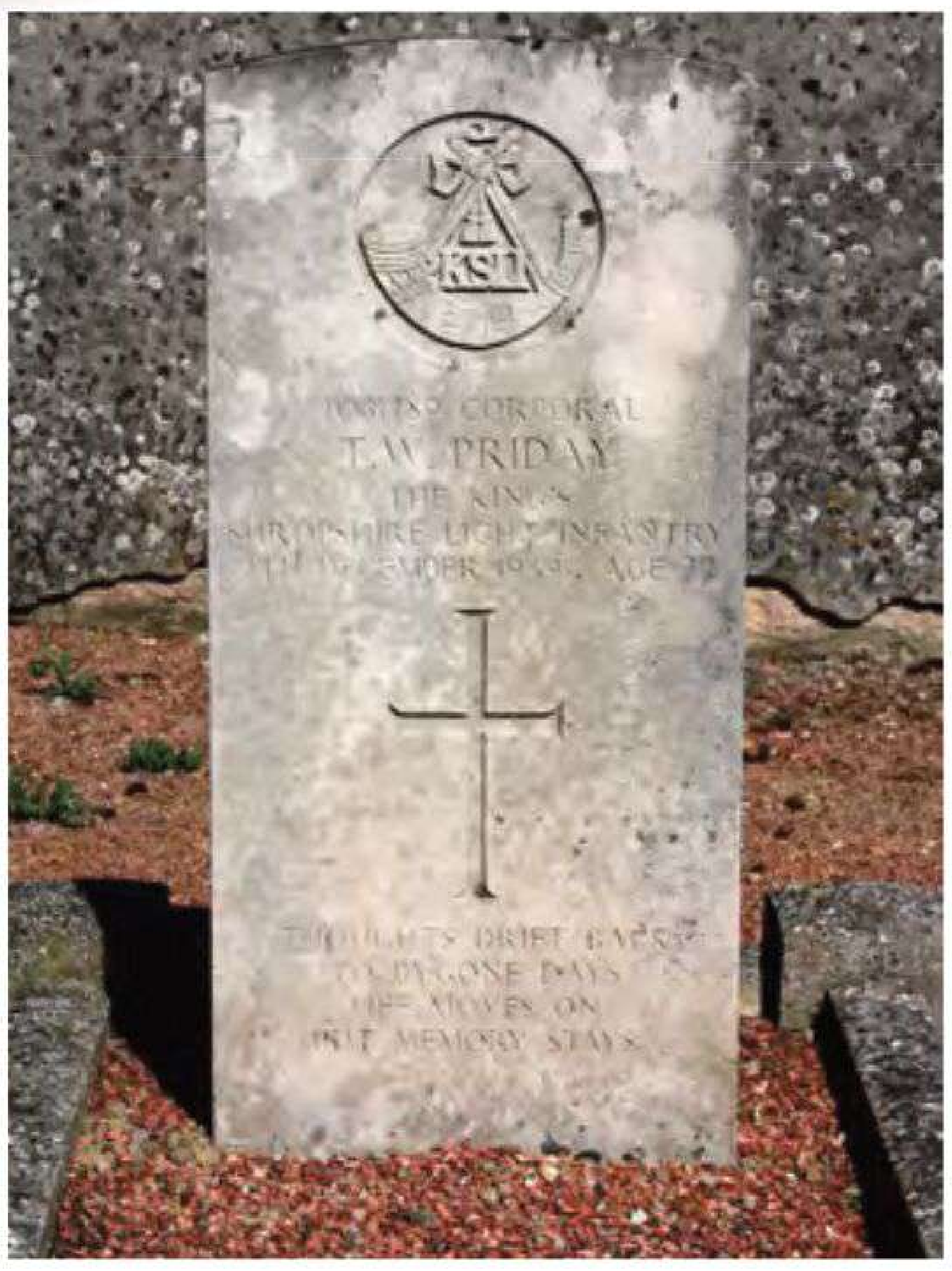
Described as "the first British soldier killed in action", Corporal Priday was buried with full military honours in a communal cemetery located on the north-eastern outskirts of the village of Luttange.



Corporal Thomas William Priday of the 1st Battalion King's Shropshire Light Infantry. (© The Shropshire Regimental Museum)

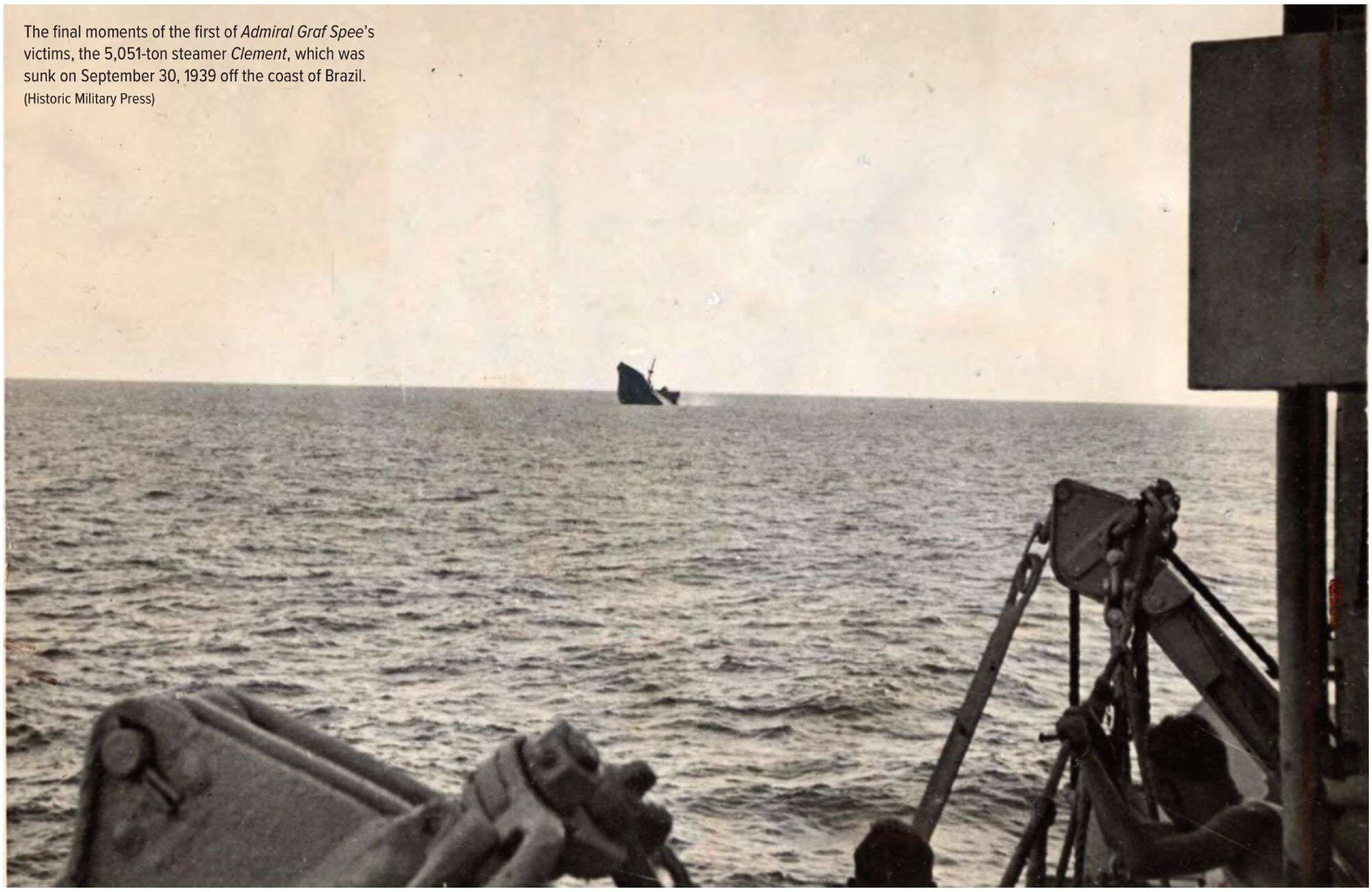


With the title of "First BEF War Grave", this is a contemporary newspaper illustration drawn by the artist Bryan de Grineau showing a pair of senior French and British officers at Priday's funeral. (© The Shropshire Regimental Museum)



During the service, the French divisional commander gave a long address, saluting Priday as "Le premier soldat qui est mort pour France". Following the announcement of the BEF's first casualties, the French issued a communiqué: "The British now have their wounded and even their dead on French soil once again."

Corporal Thomas Priday's standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone in the cemetery at Luttange. (Historic Military Press)



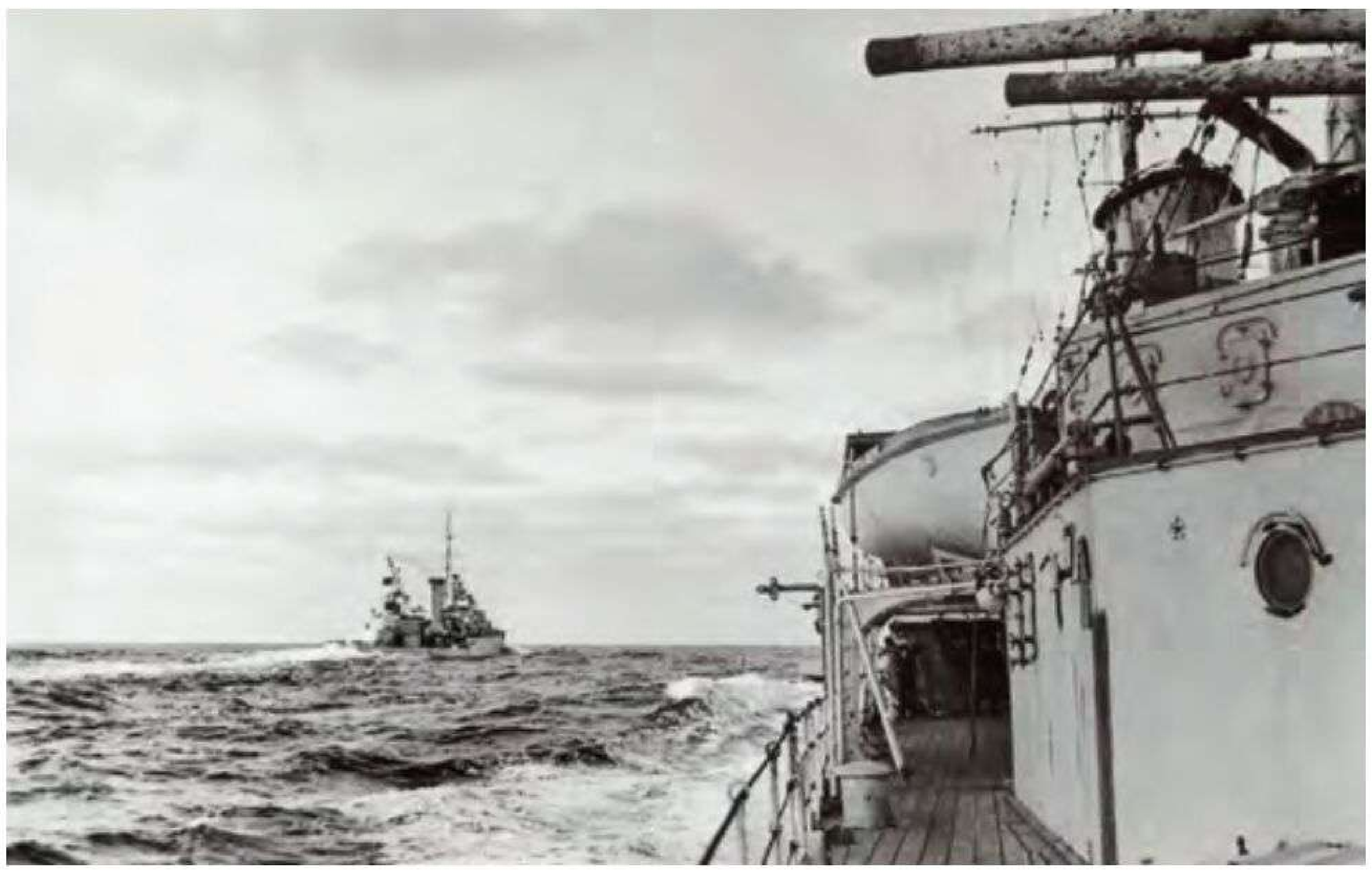
The final moments of the first of *Admiral Graf Spee*'s victims, the 5,051-ton steamer *Clement*, which was sunk on September 30, 1939 off the coast of Brazil. (Historic Military Press)

THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

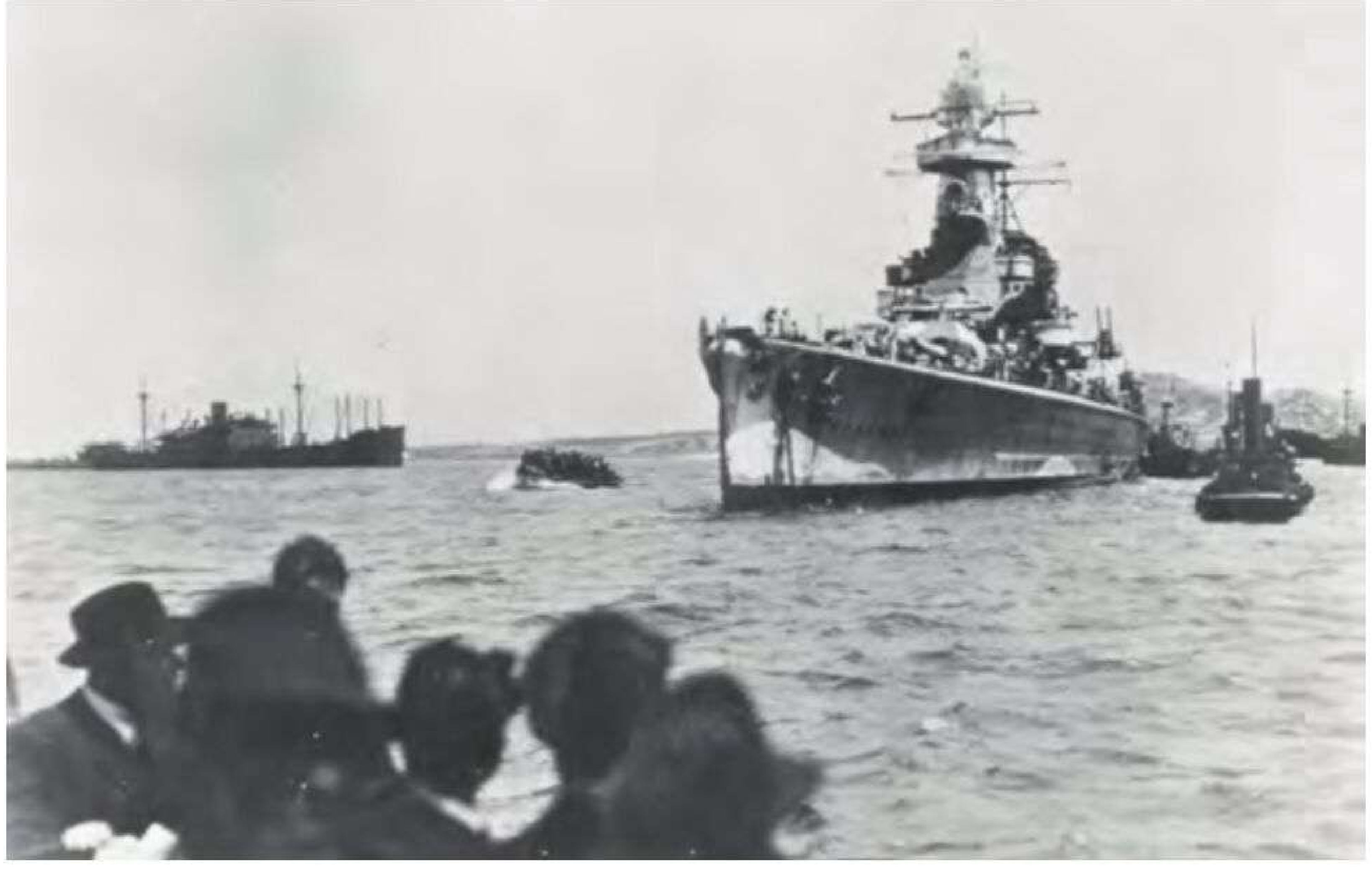
At the outbreak of the Second World War the seas were the highways of the world. Almost all intercontinental trade around the globe was conducted by ships, great and small. Protecting Britain's maritime activities was the Royal Navy's primary role, in peace and in war, just as it was her enemies' objective to disrupt those activities.

With the commencement of hostilities in 1939, the Royal Navy sought to destroy the Kriegsmarine's ability to interfere with Britain's merchant shipping. The main threats, it was believed, came from submarines and surface raiders. In terms of the latter, it was the powerful German capital ships which were of the greatest concern to the Admiralty. Enormous effort, in terms of time and resources, was therefore put into neutralising these vessels. The first of these was the operation to sink the German Deutschland-class heavy cruiser *Admiral Graf Spee*.

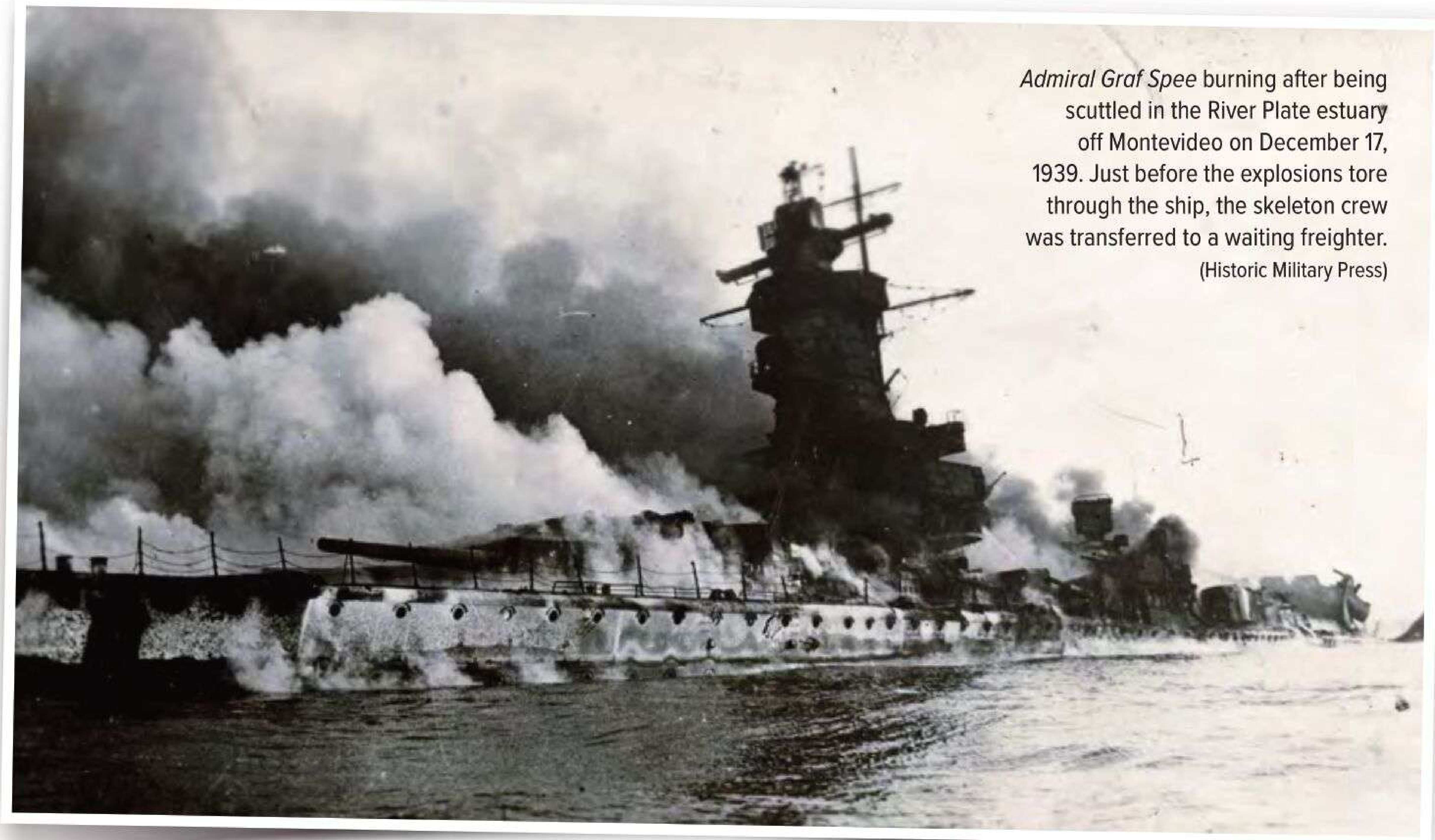
On August 21, 1939, *Admiral Graf Spee*, commanded by Kapitän zur See Hans Wilhelm Langsdorff, sailed from Wilhelmshaven bound for the waters of the South Atlantic. However, it was not until September 26 that Hitler gave the orders that allowed the Kriegsmarine to begin commerce raiding. Over the days and weeks that followed, the heavy cruiser sank nine British merchant ships and captured two others, as well as stopping, and then releasing, a neutral Dutch ship.



HMS *Achilles*, as seen from HMS *Ajax*, during the pursuit of *Admiral Graf Spee* in the Battle of the River Plate. Formerly part of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy, in October 1941 *Achilles* was transferred to the newly formed Royal New Zealand Navy. (Historic Military Press)



Admiral Graf Spee anchored off Montevideo on December 15 or 16. The warship had entered the harbour shortly after midnight on December 14. She soon became the centre of much attention, as the boats carrying sightseers in this image testify. (USNHHC)



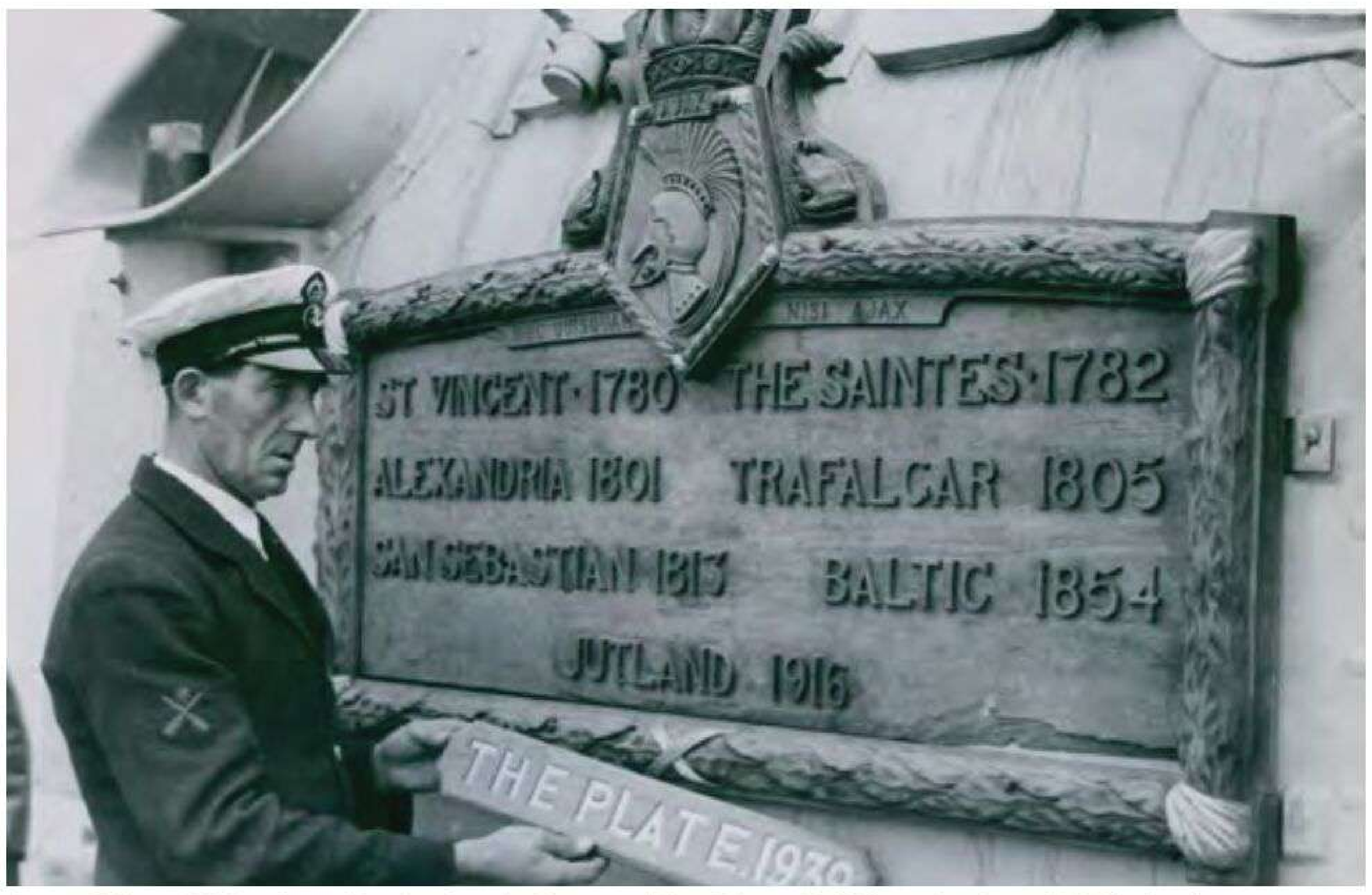
Admiral Graf Spee burning after being scuttled in the River Plate estuary off Montevideo on December 17, 1939. Just before the explosions tore through the ship, the skeleton crew was transferred to a waiting freighter. (Historic Military Press)

It was *Admiral Graf Spee*'s encounter with the last of the British merchant ships it sunk, the freighter *Streonshalh* (which was carrying a cargo of 5,654 tons of wheat) on the evening of December 7, that sealed its fate. Whilst on board *Streonshalh*, Langsdorff's boarding party picked up a copy of the *Buenos Aires Herald*. This English-language newspaper contained the latest shipping news, confirming the sailings from Rio de la Plata, or River Plate to the British. This revealed that four merchant ships had either just left or were about to leave – which might indicate that they were intending to form a convoy.

If this was the case, such a small convoy would only be escorted by a relatively minor warship which would be no match for *Admiral Graf Spee*'s 11-inch guns. Langsdorff might bag himself an entire convoy. "It would make a fine target," he told one of his officers. The German cruiser duly set course for the seas off the Uruguayan capital, Montevideo.

Whilst Langsdorff was making his preparations, Commodore Henry Harwood, commander of the Royal Navy's Force G, was doing likewise. His group of warships, consisting of the heavy cruisers HMS *Cumberland* and HMS *Exeter* and the light cruisers HMS *Ajax* and HMNZS *Achilles*, had been altered to *Admiral Graf Spee*'s presence following a distress message sent out by the crew of the merchant ship *Doric Star*. Loaded with a cargo of wool, cereals and refrigerated meat, *Doric Star* was sunk by the commerce raider off St. Helena on December 2.

Harwood had been given the eastern coast of South America as his search area. When he received the signal from *Doric Star*, one of his ships, HMS *Cumberland*, was due for a boiler clean at Port Stanley on the Falkland Islands. But he ordered his remaining three ships to rendezvous about 150 miles off the mouth of the River Plate which, he calculated, would be *Admiral Graf Spee*'s next destination. Harwood, as events would soon show, had guessed correctly.



Petty Officer W. Parfitt adds the Battle Honour "The Plate, 1939", to the list of HMS *Ajax*'s engagements and victories. (Historic Military Press)

The wreck of *Admiral Graf Spee* pictured before it was partially broken up in 1942-3. Following the scuttling of his ship, Langsdorff took his own life in his hotel room in Buenos Aires on December 20. (Historic Military Press)

At 05.30 hours on the morning of December 13, 1939, *Admiral Graf Spee* was heading southwards off the coast of Brazil when lookouts spotted a pair of masts off the ship's starboard bow. These were not the tops of the ships of the hoped-for convoy, but two warships. Langsdorff ordered the ship's engines to be worked up. *Admiral Graf Spee* reached 24 knots as she raced straight towards what were identified as Leander-class light cruisers.

Langsdorff had not anticipated meeting a Royal Navy squadron, but Harwood had expected and prepared for such an encounter. At midday on the 12th, he had informed his captains of how they were to deal with the raider: "My policy with three cruisers in company versus one pocket battleship. Attack at once by day or night. By day act as two units, First Division (*Ajax* and *Achilles*) and [Second Division] *Exeter* diverge to permit flank marking."

Langsdorff had been ordered not to become involved in engagements against superior warships and though his main armament considerably outranged the light cruisers' 6-inch guns, he was taking a risk. There are conflicting statements regarding Langsdorff's words when he made the fateful decision to attack Harwood's force. According to one witness, Langsdorff said, "Now we will see", whilst another claims he remarked, "Let's do it".

"With a roar that nearly lifted us off our feet the *Graf Spee* fired her first salvo," Captain Patrick Dove, the master of the 706-ton tanker *Africa Shell*, and a prisoner of the raider, later recalled. "I have never heard anything like it, nor had any of the other men with me. This was our first experience of fighting in a battleship. The armoured walls of our prison shuddered, clouds of dust floated down from the deck head and the air vents, the crockery rattled and several of the lights went out, their filaments shattered."

As the minutes ticked by, and the range shortened, the onslaught from the Allied ships began to take its toll on *Admiral Graf Spee*, though *Exeter*, in particular, took a terrible battering in return and was eventually forced to retire. Hounded by the British ships, Langsdorff decided to make for the safety of the neutral port of Montevideo.

While Harwood's cruisers remained outside to observe any possible breakout attempts, when safely anchored, *Admiral Graf Spee*'s worn engines were stopped. The raider had been hit approximately 70 times; 36 men were killed and 60 more were wounded.

Unable to remain in neutral Uruguay for more than seventy-two hours, on December 17, 1939, Langsdorff, convinced that Royal Navy reinforcements had arrived, or were about to do so, ordered *Admiral Graf Spee* to be scuttled to avoid further bloodshed. A crowd of 20,000 watched as the scuttling charges were fired, just before the warship exited the neutral three-mile limit, at 20.55 hours.

BATTLE OF THE HELIGOLAND BIGHT

In a speech to the British parliament on November 10, 1932, Stanley Baldwin had famously declared that "the bomber will always get through". The events of December 18, 1939, sought to dispel that claim.

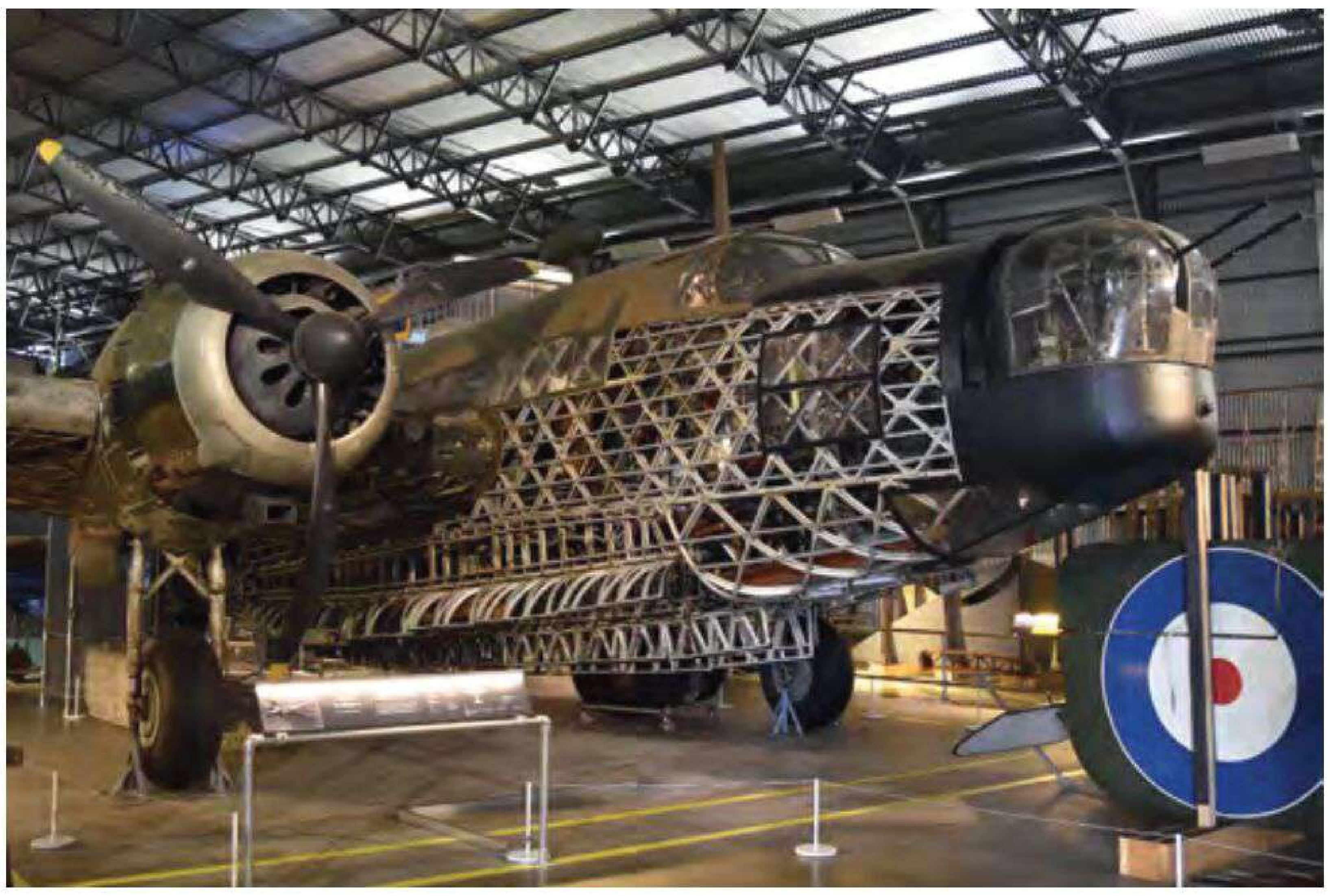
That morning, a force of Vickers Wellington medium bombers, nine from 9 Squadron at Honington, six from 37 Squadron at Feltwell, and a further nine from 149 Squadron at Mildenhall, took off to attack enemy shipping in the Heligoland Bight, a part of the North Sea that stretches from the mouth of the River Elbe west to the German ports of Wilhelmshaven and Bremerhaven. The first Wellington, N2960, was airborne from Mildenhall at 09.27 hours.

Though they were soon airborne, the crews of 37 Squadron missed the planned rendezvous, only catching up with the rest of the main formation an hour later over the North Sea. All of the attackers, bar two that had been forced to turn back, reached the target area without incident.

Bound by their rules of engagement, the bombers, despite searching for some time, were forced to turn for home without having made a meaningful attack. It was at this point that the Luftwaffe fighters made their appearance, a gaggle of Messerschmitt Bf 110s and Bf 109s, some 44 in total, attacking the Wellingtons.

A fierce battle ensued in which the defenders triumphed. The front gunner in one of the 9 Squadron bombers, N2983 flown by Sergeant John Richardson, was Aircraftman 1st Class Charles Ronald Driver, the father of the actress Minnie Driver. For his actions that day, Driver was given an immediate award of the Distinguished Flying Medal. The subsequent citation in *The London Gazette* provides an insight into the onslaught the Wellington crews faced on December 18:

"Although the aircraft was subjected to very heavy fire he remained at his post until both the front guns were put out of action and the flooring shot away or in flames, which he extinguished with his hands. As by this time the petrol system had been severely damaged, he proceeded to the hand petrol pump, and continued manual pumping until shortage of petrol caused the aircraft to land in the sea. Despite these exertions, Aircraftman Driver subsequently succeeded in launching the dinghy and assisted in saving the remainder of the crew, some of whom were wounded."



A survivor of the Battle of the Heligoland Bight – Wellington N2980 which, better known as 'The Lock Ness Wellington', can be seen at Brooklands Museum in Surrey. It was flown on the raid by the 149 Squadron crew of Squadron Leader P I Harris. (Courtesy of Alan Wilson)

Of the 22 Wellingtons, 10 were shot down, two ditched in the sea before reaching the English coast and three more crash landed in East Anglia; 68 per cent of the force was lost. It was 37 Squadron that suffered most, with five of its six aircraft shot down.

The Battle of the Heligoland Bight, the first named air battle of World War Two, was a turning point for the RAF. It was recognised that the bombers could not defend themselves against fast and well-armed German fighters in daylight. As a direct result, Bomber Command was forced to change its policy permanently and abandoned day bombing for most of the rest of the war.

Another early Vickers Wellington loss. This Mk.IA of 149 Squadron, P9218 coded OJ-J, was shot down on the night of April 21-22, 1940. It was hit by anti-aircraft fire during an attack on the airfield at Aalborg and forced to make an emergency landing at Aggersund. The crew all survived and were taken PoW. (Danish National Archives)

BRITISH TROOPS ON GERMAN SOIL

By the Christmas of 1939, the Saar front was the only sector in the western European theatre that had seen any serious action. Within days of the declaration of war the French had advanced across the River Saar into German territory, though they withdrew shortly afterwards. Over the weeks and months that followed, the French and German forces had skirmished in this area, though neither side had pushed home any large-scale attacks.

It was into this stretch of the line, the *ligne de contact*, the first line of the in-depth defences that made up the Maginot Line, that the men of the 2nd Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment were deployed by January 1, 1940, relieving troops of the Black Watch. In front of them was No Man's Land which, some 800 to 1,000 yards deep, stretched out towards the German positions; at this stage of the Phoney War, on this part of the front No Man's Land was firmly in French territory, the German troops having pushed forward into France. The Norfolks established their HQ about a mile from the front in the small village of Waldweistroff.

Late on the evening of January 4, two patrols were sent out from the *ligne de contact* by the 2nd Norfolks. One was led by Lieutenant Patrick Everitt, the second by Captain Francis Barclay of 'A' Company.

Everitt's patrol left Grindoff village at 18.00 hours and headed north-west. The men soon encountered very thick French-laid barbed-wire, which they crossed with difficulty, and then made their way to the Heltenbach stream. A ford was found which enabled Everitt's party to cross the stream and continue right through the German lines, though no enemy troops were seen. Having crossed the German border, Everitt's patrol slipped over a road that ran parallel to the frontier between the German villages of Oberesch and Biringen. A little over half a mile into the sovereign territory of the Third Reich, Everitt halted his men near a small wood.

Though no enemy soldiers had been seen, Everitt's men cut a number of telephone lines during their return to the battalion's positions, which they reached at 23.30 hours.

Another of Lieutenant Puttnam's staged photographs – this one intending to show the moment that Captain Barclay (on the right) and Lance Corporal Davis entered the building.
(Danish National Archives)

As a result of the subsequent media interest, Barclay and his men were "instructed" to recreate the events of the night of the January 4/5, 1940 for an official War Office photographer, Lieutenant L A Puttnam. The set of images was taken on January 26, 1940, and the picture seen here is one of them. The original caption states: "Men of the Norfolk Regiment receive their rum ration before going out on patrol."
(Danish National Archives)

Taken inside Germany itself, this photograph shows the furthest point in the Third Reich that was reached by Everitt and his men. According to the grid reference in the Norfolk's War Diary, the lone tree on the very right hand side of the picture marks the spot. The patrol is believed to have skirted the wood on the left, passed down the slope, crossed the road (which runs between Oberesch and Biringen) before reaching this point. Having rested for several minutes here, the men then withdrew back over the border into British-held territory. (Historic Military Press)

A view of the bridge that crossed the stream which ran in front of the building at which Barclay's patrol was engaged by German soldiers. The rubble which is all that remains of this structure can be seen here. The British front line is some 1,000 yards beyond the slope at the back of this view. At least one of the metal stanchions on the bridge has what appears to be bullet holes, perhaps evidence of the fighting when Barclay's patrol clashed with enemy troops. (Historic Military Press)

The Editor stands on the exact spot from which Captain Barclay's patrol set off on the night of January 4, 1940. The men made their way down the edge of the wood on the left, before heading out into the fields which represented No Man's Land. In the freezing temperatures and pitch black it took them about an hour and a half to reach the first indications of the German front line. The road in the immediate foreground represents the path of the first defences on the British front line. (Historic Military Press)

Barclay's patrol, which included his second in command, Second Lieutenant C. Murray Brown and three other men, left the British lines an hour earlier than Everitt's. Passing through an area referred to on their maps as Lohmuhl Wood, they moved down towards the railway line which ran into Waldwisse. Barclay's orders were to gather intelligence on the German positions behind an elaborate barbed-wire entanglement in front of the station in the village and, if possible, take a German prisoner.

Barclay found a way through the wire and moved into enemy-held territory, crossing the railway. As they continued, they saw a house close to the railway line. There was a well-worn path leading to the house and an open doorway. Barclay was fairly certain that the house was occupied as there were fresh boot prints in the snow and smoke coming out of the chimney, but everything was quiet inside. He decided to enter the house in the hope of finding some Germans asleep and, as Barclay put it "thus make an easy capture".

Finding the building empty, Barclay's patrol moved on a further twenty yards to investigate first an outhouse and then a bridge over the small stream. The former was empty and the latter heavily wired underneath.

Barclay had gone as far as he had anticipated and, even though had seen nothing of the enemy, he knew he had to return to the battalion. As they passed by the house again, Barclay searched inside once more, still hoping to make a capture. In his subsequent report, Barclay explained what happened next:

"There was then a grenade explosion just behind us so we doubled round the west side of the house and across to the east side of the road under cover of the ditch in position to cover the withdrawal of Lieutenant Murray Brown. Although I waited for him and scanned the ground with my glasses, there was no sign of him. I threw a grenade into the mouth of the archway [of the house] but would not let my patrol fire as I feared to hit Lieutenant Murray Brown and could see no target.

"Intensive throwing, by the enemy, of grenades, with small arms fire, followed. This came first from our front and then from either flank as if the enemy were trying to cut us off. We doubled back fifty yards to another vantage point and again scanned the ground for Lieutenant Murray Brown. There was no sign of him.

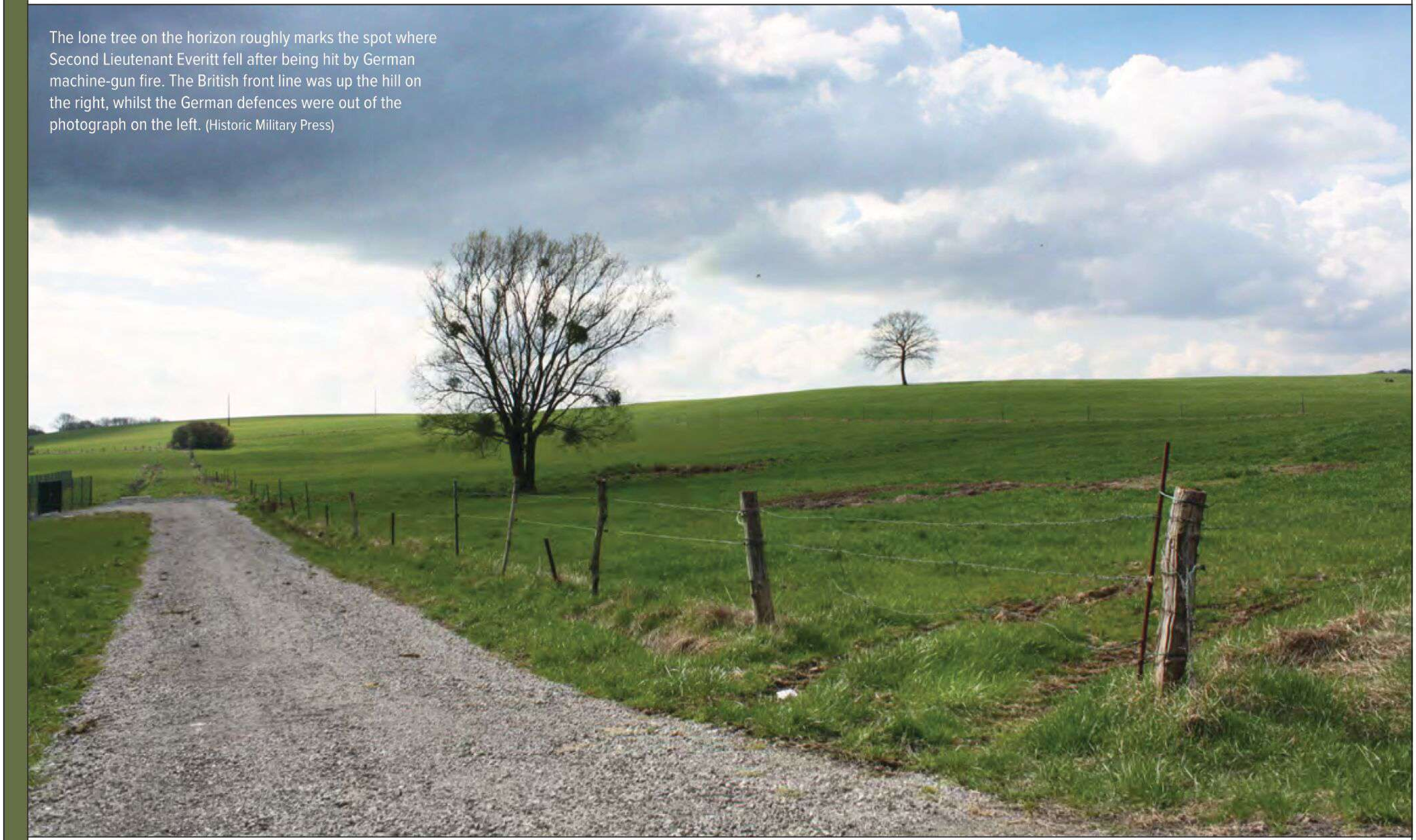
"We were then being fired on from all sides and grenade throwing continued. To prevent therefore the remainder of the patrol being cut off, I moved it quickly across road and railway hoping to circle round right handed and make a further search for Lieutenant Murray Brown. We were observed, however, and rapid fire was opened on us, moving across the open."

Very lights had illuminated the area and it was obvious to Barclay that he was heavily outnumbered and, being deep inside the German lines, his situation was only likely to deteriorate. Though it meant leaving Murray Brown behind, Barclay could do nothing more than withdraw.

As for Murray Brown, he eventually managed to steal his way back to the British line unharmed at 07.30 hours the following morning.

Barclay's patrols had been involved in the first British infantry combat of World War Two. The next day, Brigadier Warren visited the Norfolks. He was "frightfully pleased", Barclay recalled, "and patted me on the back and said: 'You've done a dammed fine show. It's the best bit of news that's happened to the BEF since we came out here.'" For his leadership that night, Barclay was awarded the Military Cross. Lance Corporal H Davis received the Military Medal, while the other members of the patrol, Second Lieutenant Murray Brown, Lance Corporal A Harris and Lance Corporal A Spooner, were Mentioned in Despatches.

The fields of No Man's Land over which Barclay's patrol on January 4, and a subsequent one by Everitt on 7 January (see next story) both passed. The village of Waldwisse is in the valley out of the picture to the left. (Historic Military Press)



The lone tree on the horizon roughly marks the spot where Second Lieutenant Everitt fell after being hit by German machine-gun fire. The British front line was up the hill on the right, whilst the German defences were out of the photograph on the left. (Historic Military Press)

FIRST OFFICER LOST IN COMBAT

In the words of the regiment's official historian, the men of the 2nd Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment had the distinction of being "the first complete infantry unit of the BEF to land in France". As we have seen, they also achieved two 'firsts' in World War Two – the first British soldiers to step foot on German soil and the BEF's first gallantry medals. Unfortunately, these successes were marred by another first for the Norfolks and the BEF – that of losing the first officer in combat.

On the morning of January 7, 1940, two days after most of the 2nd Royal Norfolks had been pulled out of the line, Second Lieutenant Patrick Everitt, part of his brigade's "patrol team", was instructed to take out another patrol of ten men. Their task was to cover a working party from the 1st Battalion Border Regiment which were to lay wire in front of Lohmuhl Wood. What happened next was subsequently recounted to Richard McMillan, a *News of the World* correspondent, by an NCO who had accompanied Everitt:

"We set off about midday in mist over snow-covered ground. Lieutenant Everitt, carrying an automatic pistol, led us a walk towards the crest of a hill dominating the German lines. As we reached the top, we paused to survey the situation. In the valley below, in the outpost, we could plainly see the Nazis moving around, and apparently unaware of our proximity. The Lieutenant went ahead, walking upright, and as we followed I called to him, 'Keep down, sir'…

"As we got nearer to the German trenches I called to him again to lie low, but he forged ahead… At that moment a burst of machine-gun fire came rat-a-tat from the German lines.

"They had seen us, and in a second their guns opened with converging fire. 'Down', I yelled, and fell flat. The rest of the patrol followed suit. We all managed to crawl into hollows as bullets, whistling into the earth with a dull 'phut', sent snow and stones whirling above.

"I peered over the edge of my little hollow and, to my horror, saw Lieutenant Everitt begin to run towards the Germans, firing as he went. His intention was obvious. He was bent on reaching the German lines and silencing the machine-guns. We called to him again, knowing he was racing to certain death. Too late! He dropped to the ground and rolled over, gave a cry which we heard distinctly, and lay still."

The rest of the patrol was forced to retreat. As soon as darkness fell, a second patrol was sent out to search for Everitt. Unsuccessful, all the men found were "signs in the snow" which indicated that the officer had "fallen in a position about 150-200 yards from Waldwisse Station". On the 9th, a radio broadcast gave details of the young officer's fate. The announcer revealed that the gravely injured Everitt had been found by enemy soldiers. Still breathing, he was taken to a German hospital but succumbed to his wounds two days later.

Second Lieutenant Patrick Anthony Clement Everitt, the son of Sir Clement and Lady Everitt of Sheringham, Norfolk, was buried with full military honours by the Germans. Today he lies in Rheinberg War Cemetery. (Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

INTRODUCTION OF RATIONING

Despite the lessons learnt from World War One, it was not uncommon to hear the remark "It'll be over by Christmas" muttered in the first few months of the new conflict, just as many had done in 1914. By the time that the Christmas of 1939 had passed, the Government, which had been considering the experiences of just over twenty years earlier, was beginning to introduce rationing.

At that time, 55m tonnes of food were imported annually from other countries, including 80% of the nation's cheese and sugar, 80% of its fruit, 90% of all cereals and fats, and 50% of the meat consumed. With the hugely increased demand for shipping space for war materiel, and the fact that many processing plants in Britain were switched to the war effort, something needed to be done.

The scheme introduced by the Ministry of Food on January 8, 1940, was intended to ensure fair shares for all at a time of national shortage. Every man, woman and child in the country was to be issued with a ration book with coupons. The latter were required before rationed goods such as sugar, meat, fats, bacon and cheese could be purchased. As part of the scheme, individuals were required to register with a particular retailer.

The distribution of ration books underway in Manchester in 1940. (NARA)

One newspaper announced the new scheme in this manner: "Food rationing in Britain is now strictly in force for sugar, bacon and ham, and butter. Meat rationing follows next month. The sugar ration of ¾ lb weekly for each person compares with the ½ lb allowed in the latter part of the last war, and there are ample supplies of dried fruit – raisins and sultanas – which contain a high percentage of natural sugar. Honey and golden syrup can also be used as energy foods for young people. Sugar is supplied in cafés and teashops without coupons. Altogether, the sugar ration is generous, and if it is mostly wanted for cooking, saccharin tablets can be used for sweetening tea or coffee. They can be had at the chemists for about 1s per hundred, and one tablet is sufficient for a cup of tea.

"As in the Great War, butchers' meat is to be rationed on the basis of value, and the effect of official control will, it is feared, materially raise present prices. The weight of the ration will thus depend on the quality and cut asked for, but about 2lbs per head a week will probably be about the average. Tripe, oxtails, liver, kidneys, brains, sweetbreads, and other so-called 'edible offals' will not be rationed, nor will sausages or meat pies if not more than 50 per cent meat contents. The demand for these ration-free supplies will be greater than the supply, but officially-fixed prices should prevent overcharging."

As one Aberdeen shopkeeper informed the *Evening Express* at the time, "Shop assistants found the customers quite cheerful about it all and there was a good deal of good-humoured banter about the care required so that none of the precious commodity should be spilled."

LYONS
TEA
SPECIAL MARGARINE
NATIONAL BUTTER

A shopkeeper cancels the coupons in a British housewife's ration book for the tea, sugar, cooking fats and bacon she is allowed for one week. (NARA)

THE MECHELEN INCIDENT

The memorial that marks the spot where the Bf 108 came down on January 10, 1940. (Courtesy of Paul Hermans)

As the middle of January approached, much of Europe was gripped in one of the coldest snaps it that had seen for decades. It was a period in which the Thames froze over for the first time since 1888, and in which, on the 20th, thermometers dipped to -11° Celsius, the lowest they had been since 1881.

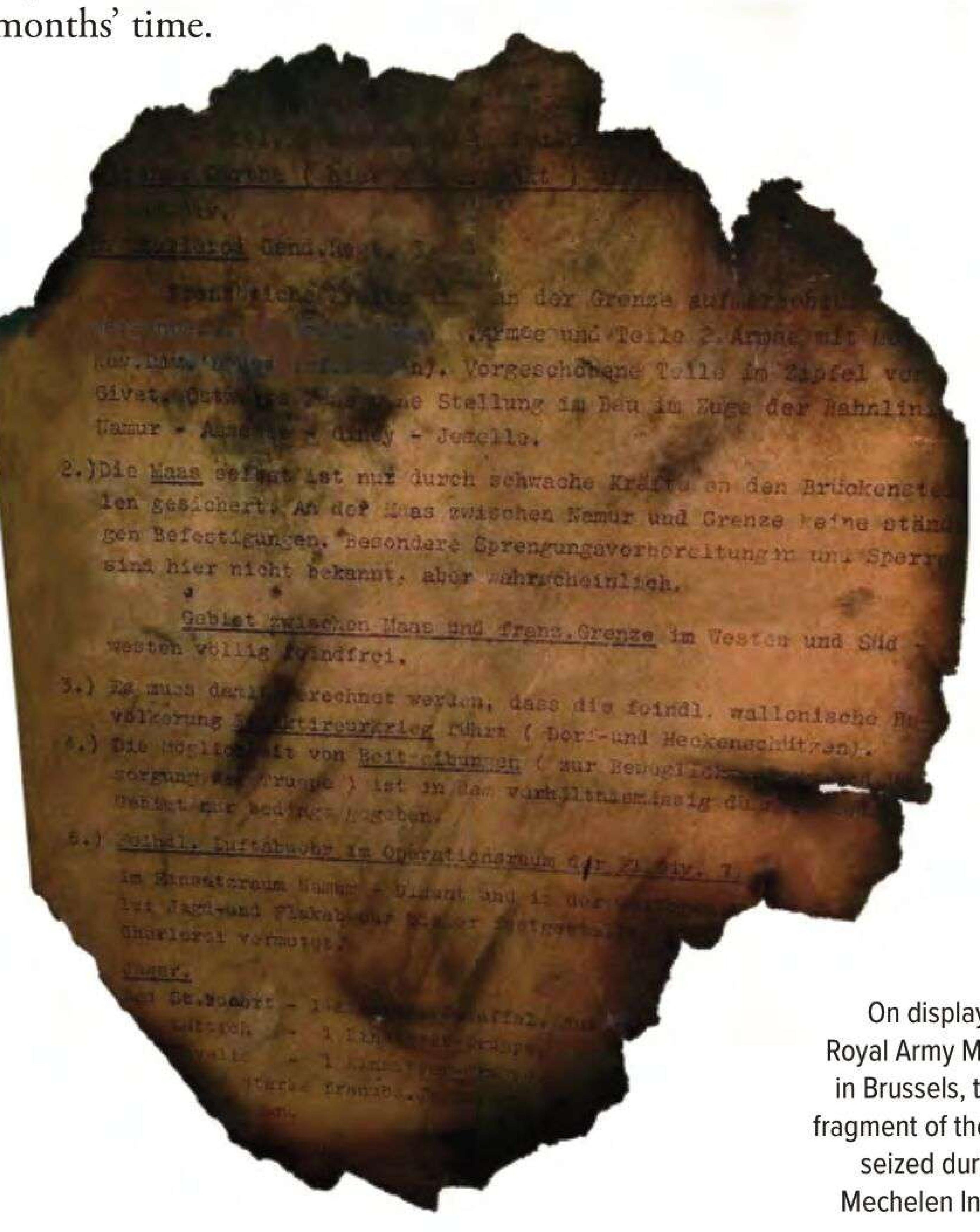
It was perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the Belgian border guards on duty at Vucht, near Mechelen-sur-Meuse, sought refuge in their guardhouse, unaware that heading their way was a Messerschmitt Bf 108 flown by Major Erich Hoenmanns. Having taken off from Loddenheide to fly to Cologne, Hoenmanns was hopelessly lost. His passenger was Major Helmuth Reinberger, whose briefcase contained a set of plans for Hitler's attack on The Netherlands and Belgium, which at that point was set for just seven days' time.

After accidentally switching off the aircraft's fuel supply, and still with no idea where he was, Hoenmanns made an emergency landing near Mechelen-sur-Meuse. Drawn by the sound of the aircraft's arrival – it was badly damaged in the impact – two of the Belgian border guards set off to investigate.

As soon as the Bf 108 had come to a halt, Hoenmanns climbed out of the cockpit. On questioning a local farmer, he established that he had overflown neutral Holland and had come down in Belgium. Panicked, Reinberger immediately set out trying to destroy the secret documents he had been carrying. When his lighter refused to work, Reinberger borrowed a match from the unsuspecting farmer. As some of the papers burned, the border guards arrived and quickly put out the flames, and in so doing salvaged some of the sheets.

Within a matter of hours, the Belgian intelligence service had garnered enough information from Reinberger's to build up a picture of the German invasion plans, the main thrust of which was to have been into north-east Belgium. The information was promptly shared with the Dutch, British and French, though many doubted the credibility of the documents. Meanwhile, the *Oberkommando* der Wehrmacht recommended to Hitler that the planned invasion should be abandoned – this was partly because of the seizure of Reinberger's document, but also due to the dire weather conditions. Hitler begrudgingly agreed at 19.00 hours on January 16.

Though the dates of the attack given in the seized papers passed without further incident, there are some who believe that the Allies, in particular the French, then made a serious mistake. "The French, who were in charge of the Allies' military strategy," wrote the historian Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, "failed to appreciate that the Germans would seek to do something different once the plan had been seen by the enemy. As a result, the French carried on concentrating their best forces – including the BEF – so that they were ready to repulse an attack on north-east Belgium, while the Germans were [now] deciding to concentrate their main thrusts further to the south." The real consequences of the Mechelen Incident would, therefore, be felt in a few months' time.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Namur - [illegible] - Jemelle.
2.)Die Maas [illegible] ist nur durch schwache Kräfte an den Brückenst
len gesichert. An der Maas zwischen Namur und Grenze keine stän
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sind hier nicht bekannt, aber wahrscheinlich.
Gebiet zwischen Maas und franz. Grenze im Westen und Süd-
westen völlig feindfrei.
3.) Es muss damit gerechnet werden, dass die feindl. wallonische Be
völkerung [illegible]krieg führt (Dorf- und Heckenschützen).
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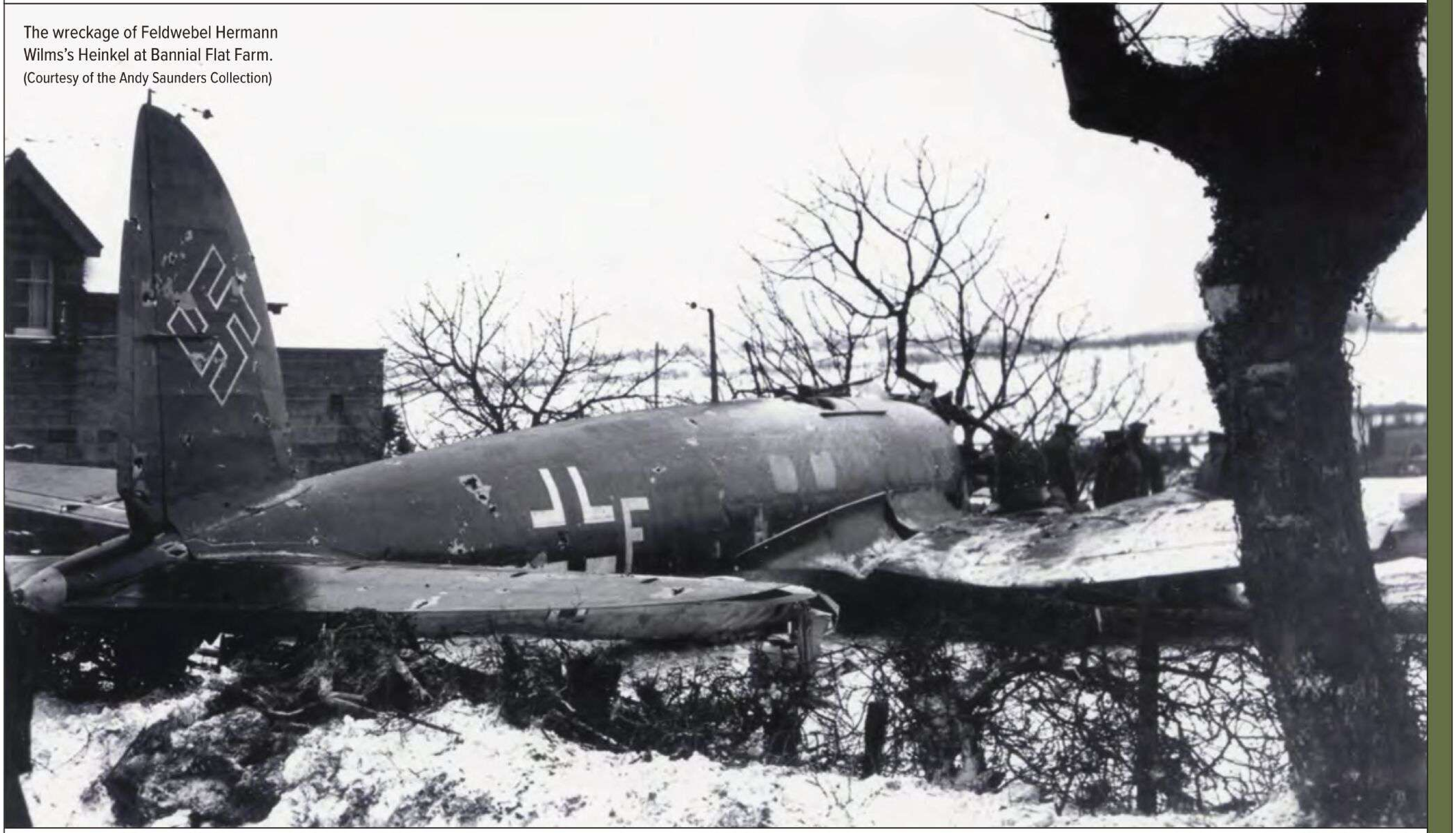
Charleroi vermutet.

On display in the Royal Army Museum in Brussels, this is a fragment of the plans seized during the Mechelen Incident.



The wreckage of Feldwebel Hermann Wilms's Heinkel at Bannial Flat Farm. (Courtesy of the Andy Saunders Collection)

FIRST GERMAN LOSS IN ENGLAND

During the early hours of February 3, 1940, a number of Luftwaffe bombers took off to attack shipping off the East Coast. Three waves of Heinkel He 111s of I and II Gruppe/KG 26, as well as Junkers Ju 88s of I/KG 30, ranged from the Orkneys in the north to East Anglia.

A number of RAF squadrons were scrambled to intercept the raiders. For their part, the pilots of 43 Squadron subsequently claimed three Heinkels destroyed and one damaged. One of the squadron's victorious Hurricanes was that flown by Flight Lieutenant Peter Townsend.

Of the events that day, Townsend later recalled the following: "In a cutting wind, the other pilots in my flight and I went for our Hurricanes dispersed on the far side of the airfield. Far away, at Danby Beacon Radar Station, the duty operator picked up the phone, it was 09.03 – the operator had seen a blip, then another – unidentified aircraft, some 60 miles out to sea, were approaching at 1,000 ft. Moments later, Blue Section of 43 Squadron was scrambled and on its way from Acklington airfield to intercept."

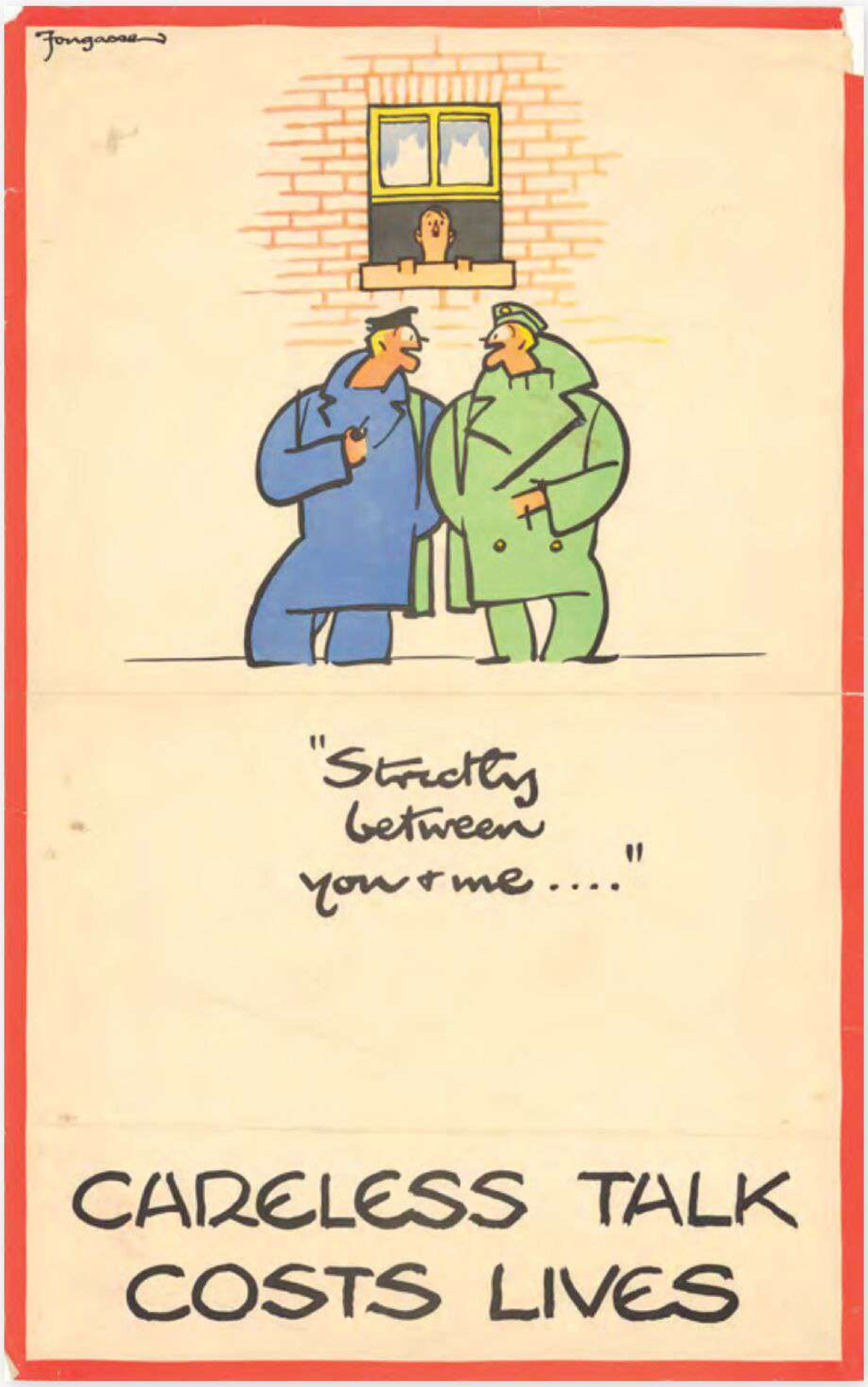
Accompanied by Flying Officer Patrick Folkes and Sergeant James Hallowes, Townsend was directed towards a bomber reported to be attacking a ship off Whitby. "Suddenly there it was," he continued, "a Heinkel just below cloud. 'Tally-Ho! two-o-clock,' banking right in a climbing turn, it came into my sights – I pressed the button… I passed it as it entered cloud – seconds later Folkes, the Heinkel and I tumbled out of the cloud almost on top of one another, then the German turned shore wards with a trail of smoke behind him and force-landed."

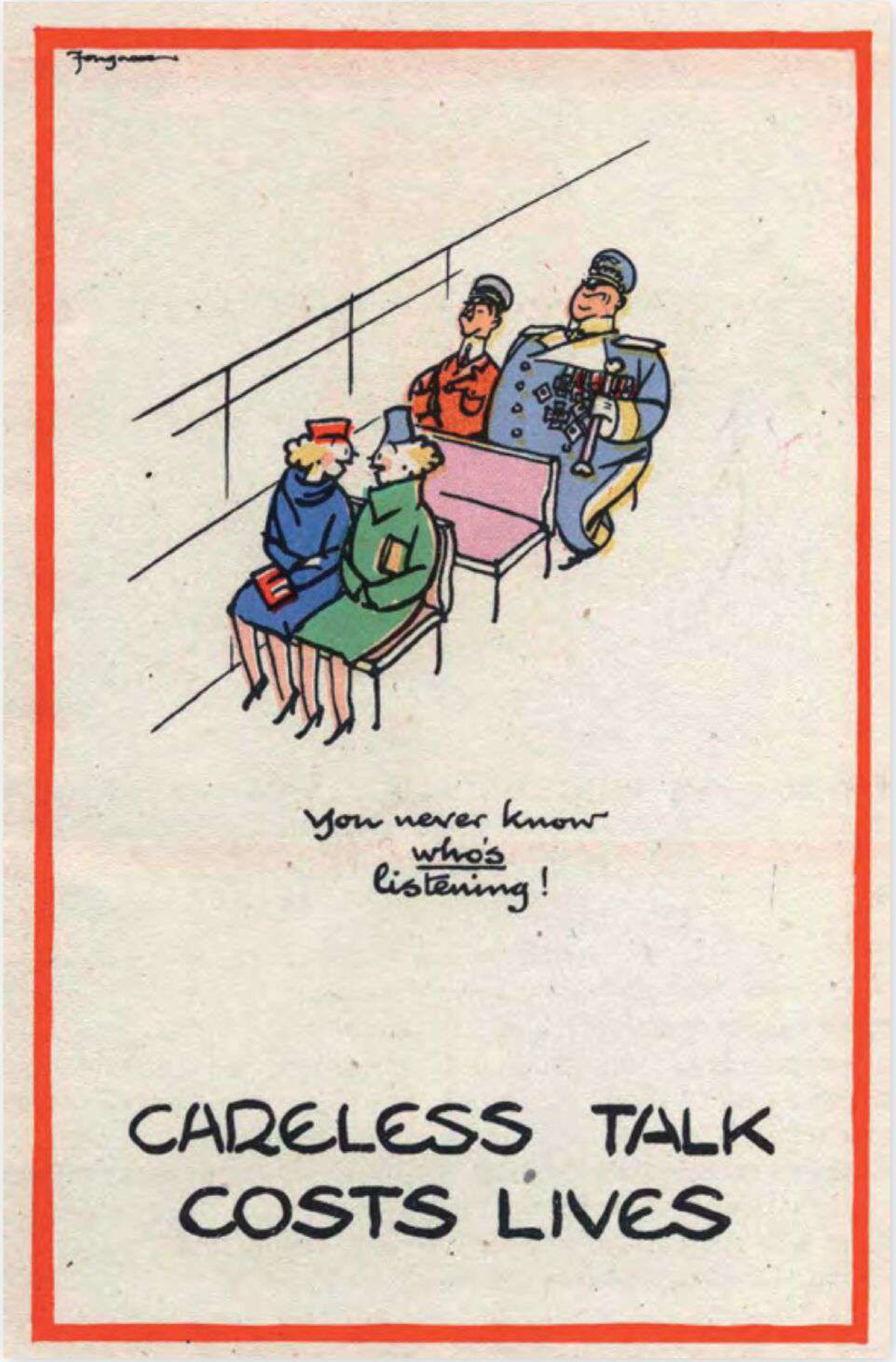
Passing low over the fishing port itself, the bomber was pursued until the very end. This came at 09.40 hours when the aircraft ploughed across a snow-covered field, tore through a hedge and, hitting a tree, came to rest just yards from the farm buildings at Bannial Flat Farm near Whitby. It was the first German aircraft to crash in England in World War Two.

Watching the events unfolding above them, local residents had already started to follow the stricken bomber even before it was on the ground. A local Special Constable, Arthur Barratt, was soon on the scene. He arrived to find the pilot, Feldwebel Hermann Wilms, in the process of burning his maps and papers, which were promptly extinguished. Whilst Wilms had survived the combat and subsequent crash relatively unscathed, one of the gunners, Unteroffizier Karl Missy, has been seriously wounded with one leg broken and the other badly mutilated. The two other crew members, Unteroffizier Rudolf Leushake and Unteroffizier Johann Meyer were killed.

"Remorse rather than curiosity impelled me to visit the survivors in hospital," Townsend later recalled. Such was the extent of Missy's injuries that he was repatriated to Germany in 1943. The next time Townsend met Missy was in his home in Germany in 1969; the two remained friends until the German's death in 1981.

Whilst engaged on an armed shipping reconnaissance flight, this Heinkel He 111 H-3, coded 1H+EN, was shot down and crashed at North Berwick Law, East Lothian, on February 9, 1940. It was deemed repairable and it was therefore the first enemy aircraft to arrive in Britain that would subsequently be test flown. (Historic Military Press)





Two of Cyril Bird's 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' posters. In recognition of his work, Bird was appointed a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1946.
(National Museum of Denmark /Historic Military Press)

'CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES'

On February 6, 1940, the Ministry of Information (MoI), the central government department responsible for publicity and propaganda in World War Two, launched its famous 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' campaign. The result was some of the most iconic and recognisable images of the war.

The new campaign was supported by widespread newspaper coverage. The following appeared in the *Lancashire Evening Post* on February 7: "There has been far too little restraint on chatter about affairs connected with the Fighting Services, defence activities, and details of such important things as aeroplanes and munitions. Therefore, a national warning campaign to point out the dangers and the grave consequences of ill-advised gossip is being instituted by the Government through the Ministry of Information. It is hoped, by exhortation and poster, to impress on all classes of the public how easily incautious remarks may imperil many lives and the great need for caution and reticence in wartime."

At the same time, the MoI distributed 2.5m posters to offices, hotels, shops, banks and public houses warning of the dangers of intentionally or mistakenly discussing vital information such as the movement of military units or the departure of merchant ships. Central to the campaign were the posters created by the *Punch* cartoonist Cyril Kenneth Bird, all of which depicted Hitler eavesdropping from open windows, train luggage racks, telephone kiosks or even concealed in framed portraits on the walls.

As the Imperial War Museum's website notes, it was whilst he was studying engineering at King's College, London, that Bird "also attended evening classes in art in order to follow his preferred profession as an artist": "He joined the Royal Engineers in 1914 but was badly wounded at Gallipoli in 1916. During his recuperation he started producing cartoons. These were published in *Punch* and other magazines and established his future career. He adopted the name 'Fougasse' from a small land mine used by the Royal Engineers which might or might not hit the mark. From 1937 to 1948 he was Art Editor for *Punch*. During the Second World War, Bird devoted himself to producing propaganda of all kinds for nearly all Government Ministries as well as many Charities. All his work was given free."

As Bird himself wrote in 1946 (see *A School of Purposes*), in defining his work as 'propaganda', the word was "used in it less ominous sense". He went on to explain that in order to succeed in their aim, his designs had three main obstacles to overcome: "Firstly, a general aversion to reading any notice of any sort; secondly, a general disinclination to believe that any notice, even if read, can possibly be addressed to oneself; [and] thirdly, a general unwillingness, even so, to remember the message long enough to do anything about it."

With their distinctive style, quick humour and distinctive red border enclosing a wide, clean margin, Bird's posters undoubtedly had an impact.

THE ALTMARK INCIDENT

Having supported *Admiral Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic, the supply ship *Altmark* was returning to her home port following the Battle of the River Plate. On board were 299 Allied merchant seamen captured when their vessels were intercepted or sunk by the commerce raider.

The British Consulate in Montevideo raised the alarm that *Altmark* was at large on the high seas; for the Admiralty, the hunt was on. The supply ship was first spotted on February 15, 1940 as it passed through the waters of neutral Norway. Despite being stopped by Norwegian patrol vessels on a number of occasions, *Altmark* was allowed to continue on its way. The following morning *Altmark* was located by a patrolling Coastal Command Hudson of 220 Squadron.

Six ships of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla led by Captain Philip L Vian in HMS *Cossack* were ordered to intercept. But *Altmark* was still in Norwegian waters and Vian was unwilling to breach Norway's neutrality without specific instructions to do so. These orders quickly came from the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill: "Arrest *Altmark* in territorial waters should she be found. The ship is violating neutrality in carrying British prisoners of war to Germany... The *Altmark* must be regarded as an invaluable trophy."

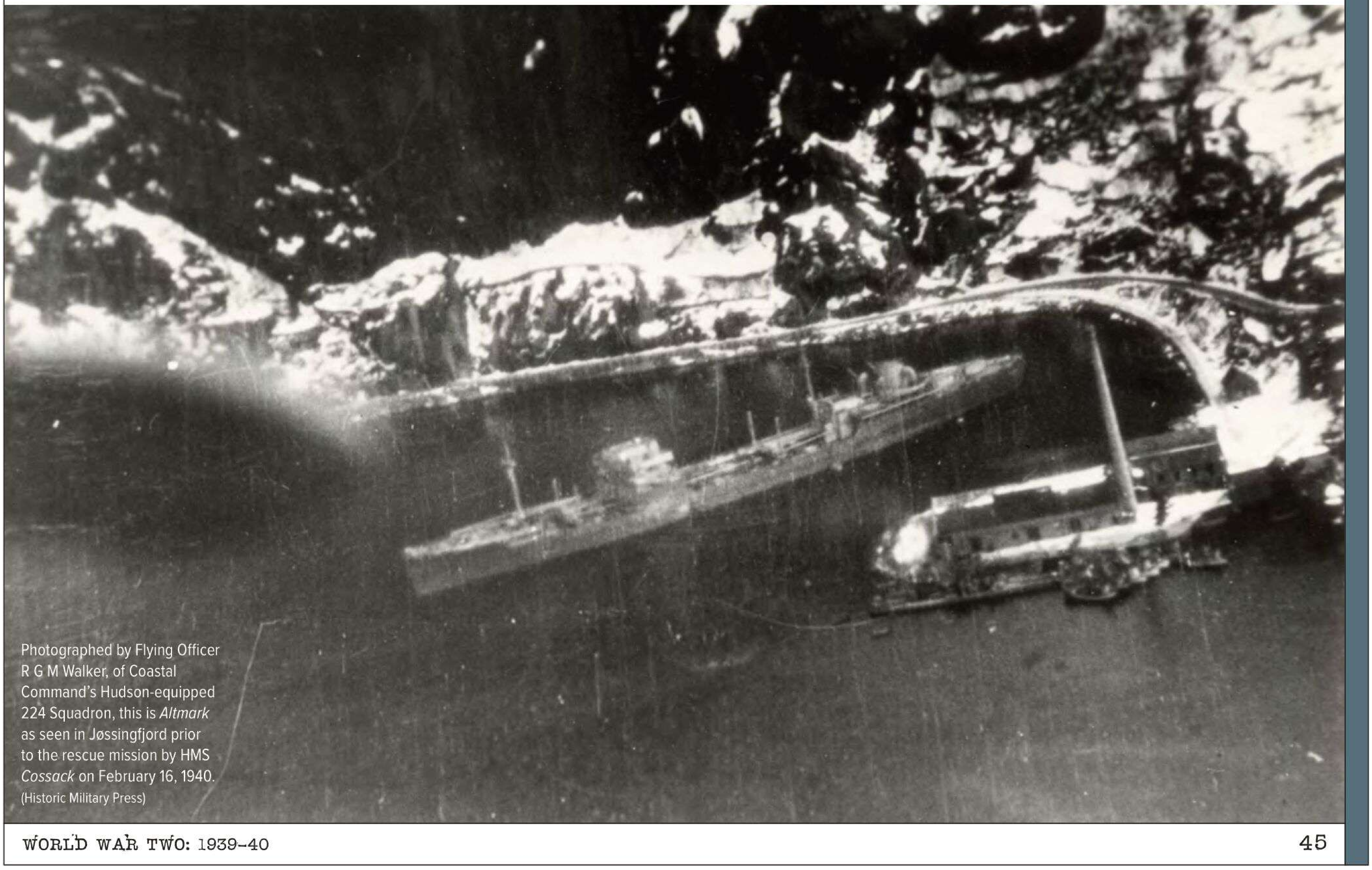
A member of the German crew of *Altmark*, who was wounded in the raid by HMS *Cossack*, being flown back to Germany for treatment.
(National Museum of Denmark)

The German ship sought refuge in Jøssingfjord, a small inlet with only one entrance barely 200 yards wide. As ordered, *Cossack*, accompanied by *Intrepid* and *Ivanhoe*, attempted to enter the fjord only to be blocked at the entrance by Norwegian torpedo-boats. Sensibly, Vian withdrew and informed the Admiralty of these developments. "When this information reached the Admiralty", Churchill later wrote, "I intervened, and, with the concurrence of the Foreign Secretary, ordered our ships to enter the fiord [*sic*]."

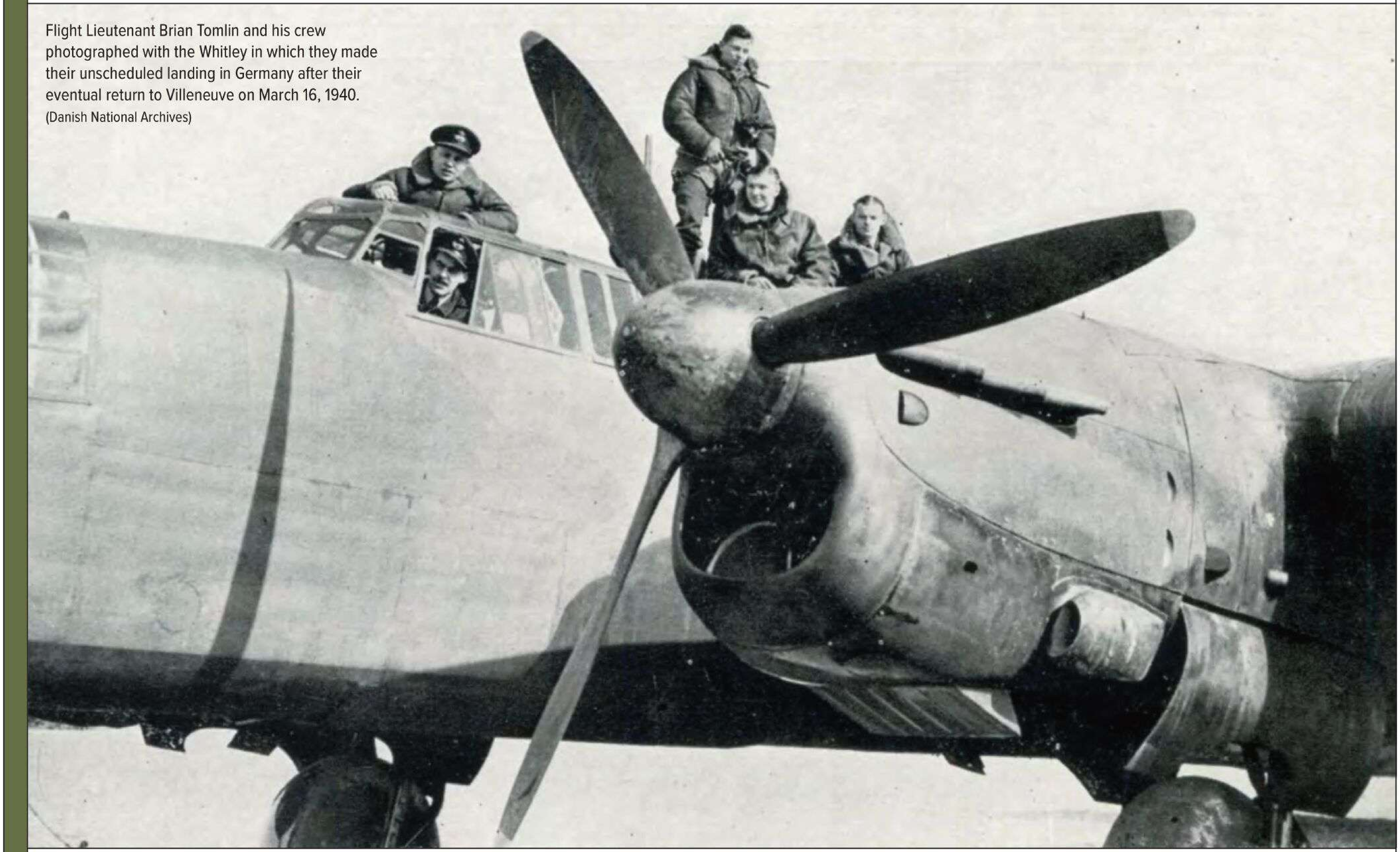
Having failed to persuade the Norwegians to join the Royal Navy's operation, Vian took *Cossack* back into the fjord after dark. "Every man was tense with excitement", recalled one member of the destroyer's crew. "The boarding party was at the ready with rifles in hand. We kept our bayonets in the scabbards for the time being." The men had been ordered to jump as soon as the tanker was close enough.

However, *Altmark*'s skipper, Captain Heinrich Dau, was not prepared to give in without a fight. Reputedly telling one of his officers that "this is going to surprise the world", Dau ordered the tanker to reverse engines at full speed. As HMS *Cossack* closed in, the tanker tried to ram her. Vian had to swing *Cossack* sideways and the great tanker scraped the full length of the destroyer.

With little room to manoeuvre in the fjord, at 22.20 hours *Altmark* brushed close enough for some of the Royal Navy boarding party to get across – followed soon after by the remainder. After a tense few minutes of fighting, what is reputedly the last major boarding action ever undertaken by the Royal Navy was over. With the supply ship under British control, the prisoners were freed and were landed at Leith on February 17.



Photographed by Flying Officer R G M Walker, of Coastal Command's Hudson-equipped 224 Squadron, this is *Altmark* as seen in Jøssingfjord prior to the rescue mission by HMS *Cossack* on February 16, 1940.
(Historic Military Press)



Flight Lieutenant Brian Tomlin and his crew photographed with the Whitley in which they made their unscheduled landing in Germany after their eventual return to Villeneuve on March 16, 1940. (Danish National Archives)

LANDED IN GERMANY

Following on from the first leaflet-dropping sorties at the beginning of September 1939, these missions, code-named *Nickel*, became one of the mainstays of the work of the RAF's bomber fleet for the next few months. During one *Nickel* raid on the night of October 1-2, 1939, four Whitleys from 10 Squadron dropped leaflets on Berlin in very severe weather conditions – and in doing so became the first RAF aircraft to visit that city in wartime.

There was little let up in the frequency of leaflet drops during the early months of 1940. Between February 17 and April 7, no less than 228 *Nickel* raids were undertaken. Of this number, 102 had been carried out by Vickers Wellingtons, 64 by Handley Page Hampdens, and 62 by Whitleys.

One of these missions took place on the night of March 7-8, when two Whitleys of 77 Squadron, those piloted by Flight Lieutenant Brian Tomlin and Flying Officer Gordon Raphael, took off from Villeneuve in France to drop leaflets on the city of Posen (Poznań) in western Poland. At the time it was described as Bomber Command's "longest flight of the war".

Less than a week later both Tomlin and Raphael were ordered back to Poland, this time to leaflet drop Warsaw on March 15-16. Raphael's flight was relatively uneventful, and his aircraft landed back at base at 06.50 hours on the 16th.

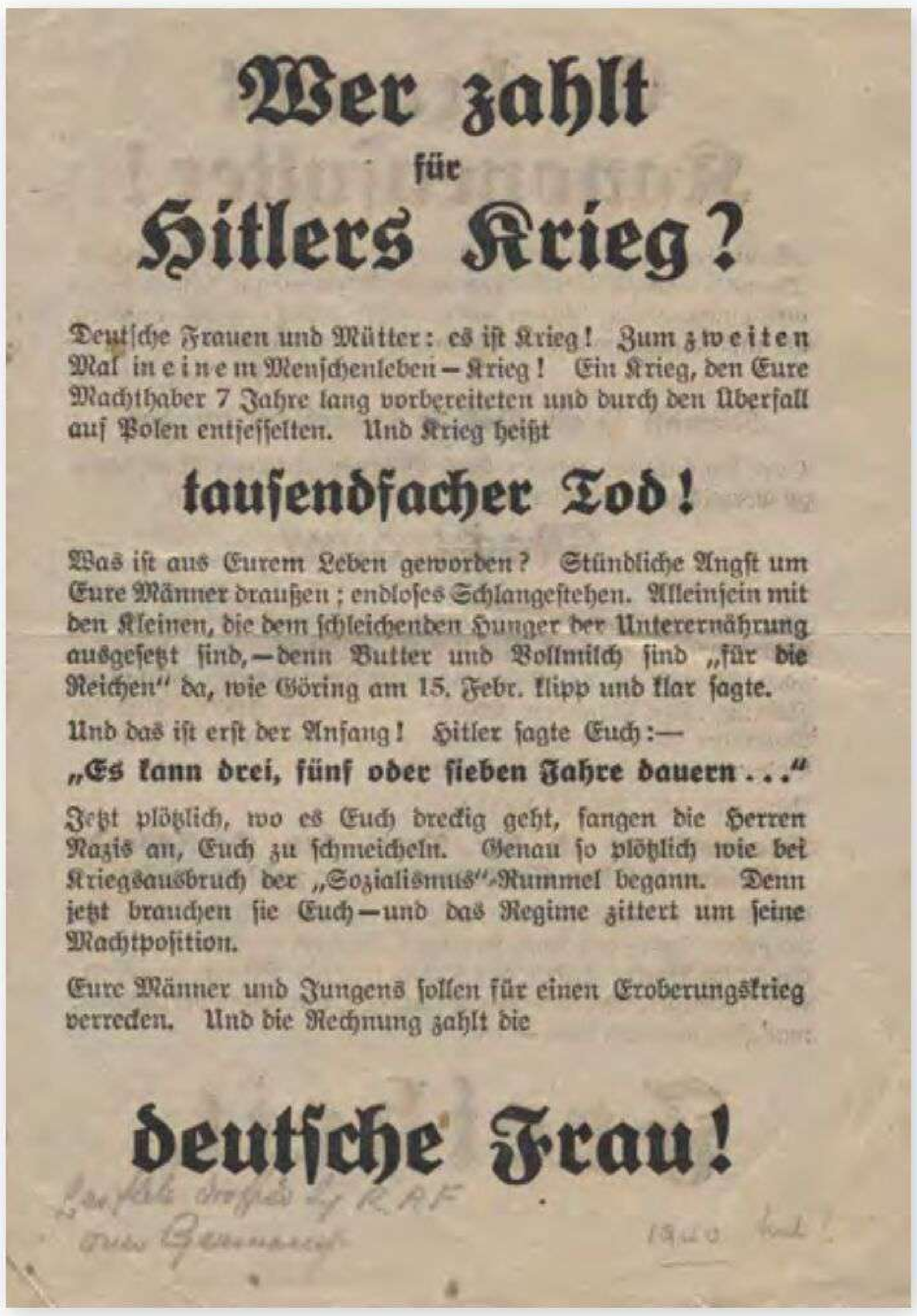
For Tomlin's crew, things were fine until the return leg of the flight until, as he later recalled, his aircraft became "very short of petrol". As the situation deteriorated and believing that that they were back over friendly territory, Tomlin decided to make an emergency landing.

"We landed in a field which sloped up slightly at each end", he recalled. "We unloaded the guns, stopped the engines, and all got out to go and meet the little group of peasants who were running towards us." One of the Whitley's crew stepped forward and enquired: "C'est France, n'est-ce pas'?" The peasant, obviously perplexed, simply shook his head uncomprehendingly.

A moment's silence followed, during which both groups contemplated their next move. Tomlin recalled they "asked again, "C'est France, n'est-ce pas?". The peasant said in French, but with a strong German accent: 'No sir, this is Germany; the frontier is about twenty miles away', and he pointed west."

It was then that the penny dropped. "Like one man we turned and bolted for the machine", continued Tomlin. "Other figures were hurrying towards us from the far end of the field. We started the engines in a flash and without pausing to thank anybody we got going. The rear gunner reports that the people at the other end of the field opened fire on us as we were taking off."

Hedge hopping all the way, Tomlin's crew, still unsure of their position, simply flew in the direction indicated by the German villager. "We did not land again until we were quite sure we were in France," concluded Tomlin.



Wer zahlt
für
Hitlers Krieg?

Deutſche Frauen und Mütter: es iſt Krieg! Zum zweiten Mal in einem Menſchenleben – Krieg! Ein Krieg, den Eure Machthaber 7 Jahre lang vorbereiteten und durch den Überfall auf Polen entfeſſelten. Und Krieg heißt

tauſendfacher Tod!

Was iſt aus Eurem Leben geworden? Stündliche Angſt um Eure Männer draußen; endloſes Schlangeſtehen. Alleinſein mit den Kleinen, die dem ſchleichenden Hunger der Unterernährung ausgeſetzt ſind, – denn Butter und Vollmilch ſind „für die Reichen" da, wie Göring am 15. Febr. klipp und klar ſagte.

Und das iſt erſt der Anfang! Hitler ſagte Euch:—

„Es kann drei, fünf oder ſieben Jahre dauern . . ."

Jetzt plötzlich, wo es Euch dreckig geht, fangen die Herren Nazis an, Euch zu ſchmeicheln. Genau ſo plötzlich wie bei Kriegsausbruch der „Sozialismus"-Rummel begann. Denn jetzt brauchen ſie Euch – und das Regime zittert um ſeine Machtpoſition.

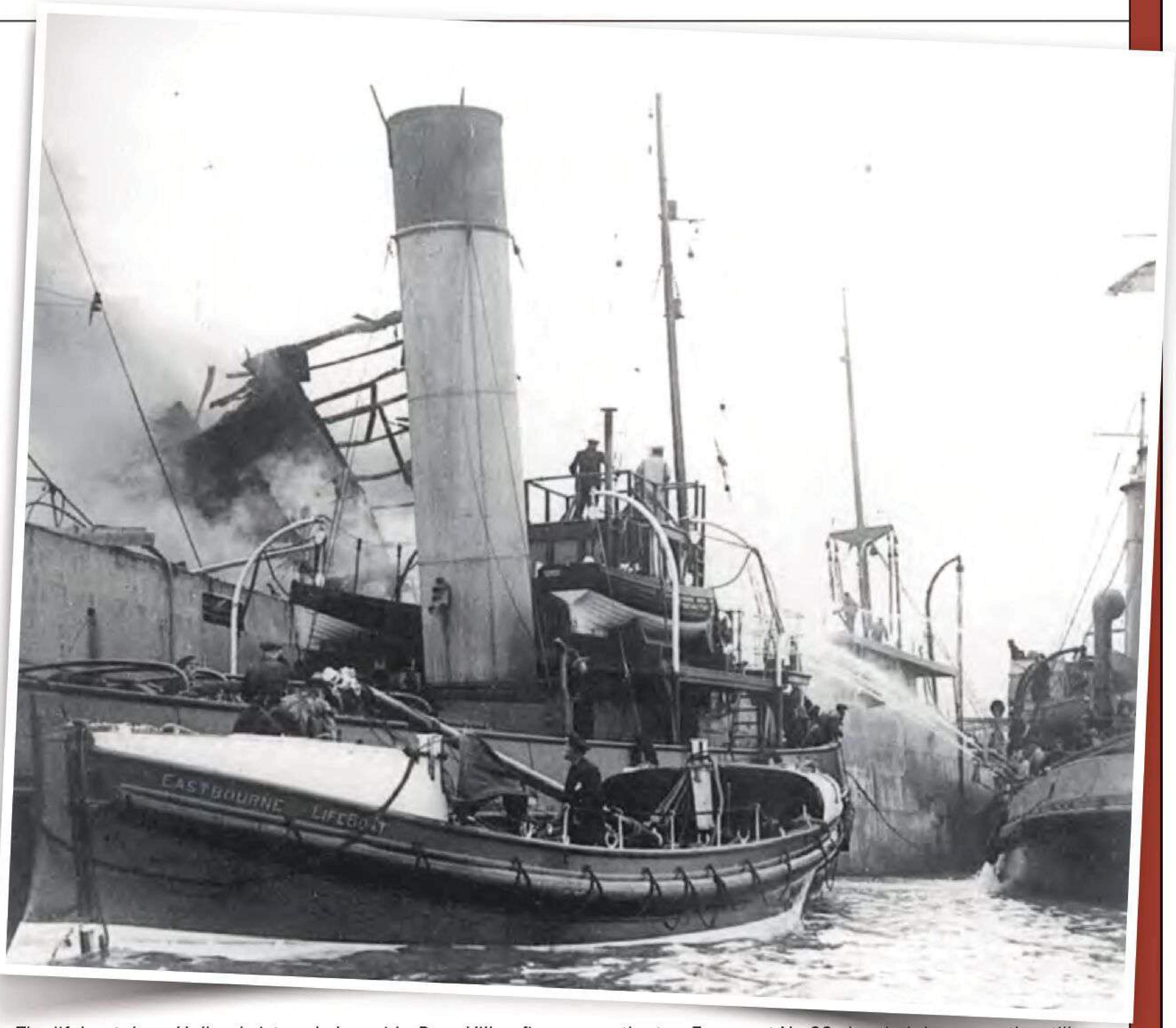
Eure Männer und Jungens ſollen für einen Eroberungskrieg verrecken. Und die Rechnung zahlt die

deutſche Frau!

Leaflets dropped by R.A.F
over Germany
1940

An RAF propaganda leaflet dropped over Germany in 1940. It is headed "Er braucht Kononenfutter!" – "Cannon fodder needed". The pencil annotation suggests that this example was retained as a memento of one airman's involvement in the *Nickel* raids. (Historic Military Press)

SS BARN HILL SUNK



The lifeboat *Jane Holland* pictured alongside *Barn Hill* as firemen on the tug *Foremost No.22* play their hoses on the still burning merchant ship. The extent of the damage to the steamer can clearly be seen in this picture. (Courtesy of Beckett Newspapers Ltd)

On the evening of Wednesday, March 20, 1940, a freshening westerly wind ensured that the sea was lumpy and full as the 5,439-ton steamer SS *Barn Hill*, en route from Halifax to London under the command of Captain Michael O'Neil, made its way eastwards through the English Channel on the final stages of its transatlantic crossing. Everything was peaceful until *Barn Hill* reached a point some six miles south-south-west of Beachy Head.

Captain O'Neil himself later described what happened next: "At about half past ten the look-out shouted 'Aircraft overhead!' We naturally assumed that it was a friendly 'plane, but something about the way in which it circled overhead made me feel uneasy. Then came the first warning of trouble, as the 'plane started a dive towards us. The *Barn Hill* then shook and began to list, before partly righting herself. A bomb had dropped only a few feet to port."

Knocked unconscious, O'Neil was unable to remember the next few minutes. It was subsequently established that a string of bombs had been dropped by the raider, straddling the ship. One of the bombs hit *Barn Hill*'s stern, penetrated her deck plating and exploded in the No.4 hold, whilst a second fell down the funnel. The contents of the No.4 hold, a mixture of timber and carbide, caught fire. At the same time, the ship's engines ground to a halt. Slowly she began to list to starboard. Four of the crew lay dead and eight more were badly injured, one of whom, 61-year-old Second Engineer Officer Douglas Bertram, died later in hospital. Captain O'Neil had been blown from his feet and rolled under some debris, where, hidden from sight, he was assumed by the surviving crew members to be dead.

As well as a Dutch merchant ship that responded to the stricken *Barn Hill*'s plight, the Eastbourne lifeboat *Jane Holland* was also launched. Arriving on scene at 01.40 hours, the RNLI crew found the steamer well alight and explosions could be heard within the hull. The bridge had been blown forward and was resting, mangled, on the fore well-deck.

After rescuing the survivors, *Jane Holland* returned to its station – but not for long. At 04.45 hours, the lifeboat station was informed that the ship's bell was being rung on *Barn Hill*. Arriving back at the merchant ship, it was discovered that it was Captain O'Neil who, having regained consciousness, was ringing the bell. With a fractured collarbone, double fractured arm, five broken ribs, pierced lung and violent concussion O'Neil was eventually lowered down to the lifeboat.

Barn Hill gained the distinction of becoming the first merchant ship sunk by enemy aircraft in the English Channel during World War Two. The attacker is believed to be a Heinkel He 111H of Führungskette des X Fliegerkorps, a formation that was charged with developing anti-shipping tactics that would, in a few months' time, become a part of the initial phase of the Battle of Britain, the so-called Kanalkampf or Battle over the Channel.

Drama off the South Coast, March 21, 1940. With the Eastbourne lifeboat *Jane Holland* and a rescue tug alongside, the SS *Barn Hill* is still smouldering and burning following the attack the previous evening. (Courtesy of the Andy Saunders Collection)

FIRST SPITFIRE SHOT DOWN

The weather on the morning of April 3, 1940 was poor. It had been raining all morning and thick cloud hung low over RAF Catterick in North Yorkshire, the home of 41 Squadron. Despite the conditions, a lone Heinkel He 111, Raid X32, was reported attacking fishing boats off Whitby. At the controls of Spitfire Mk.I N3114, Flight Lieutenant Edgar Norman Ryder, Red Leader of 'A' Flight, was scrambled to intercept the raider at 12.20 hours.

Once airborne, he gained altitude as quickly as the conditions allowed, heading out over the North Yorkshire coast above Redcar. Ryder soon spotted the trawlers which had been "sorely knocked about" by the enemy bomber. But it appeared that the fishermen had fought back and when Ryder sighted the Heinkel, he could see that one of its engines had been disabled.

The intruder, a He 111H-3 of Kampfgeschwader 26, that coded 1H+AC, was limping along just 200 feet from the surface of the North Sea. Having throttled back, Ryder swung down and opened fire. Concentrating on the code letter 'A' on the bomber's fuselage, he watched as a four-second burst hammered into it. Ryder was aware of a couple of bangs against his own aircraft, but he was so intent on his attack that he paid no attention to them.

During the mêlée, one of the trawlers also fired up at the German bomber. "Suddenly the German machine flew low over us and my son Tom 'let go' with our Lewis gun," the skipper, Bob Watkinson, recalled in an interview after the action. "He put eight or nine shots in the right place, and the 'plane wobbled and dropped into the sea about a quarter of a mile away."

Later in the war, some of the pilots of 41 Squadron celebrate the squadron's 100th victory claim. Flight Lieutenant Norman Ryder DFC is pictured cutting the cake. (ww2images)

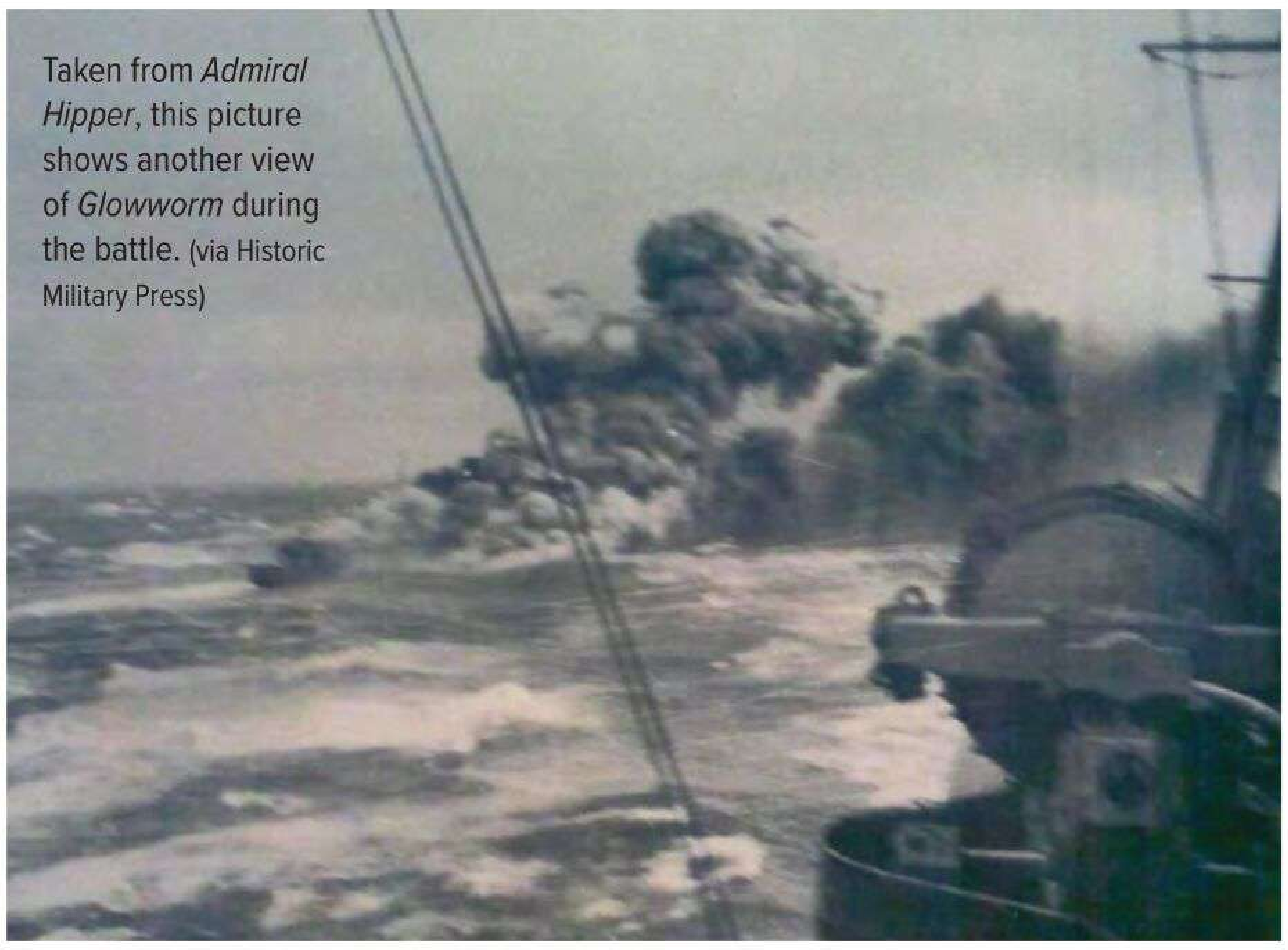
Pilots from 41 Squadron pictured standing by a Supermarine Spitfire Mk.IIA at RAF Hornchurch in December 1940. Flight Lieutenant Edgar Ryder can be seen second from the right. (via Historic Military Press)

Having loitered long enough to see the crew climb out of their aircraft, Ryder turned for home. It was then that he noticed that the oil temperature was rapidly rising – the Heinkel had obviously damaged his Spitfire more than he had realized. With fumes filling his cockpit and the temperature becoming "almost intolerable", Ryder, too low to bale out, knew he would have to ditch.

Scanning the sea below, he spotted a trawler nearby. As Ryder approached, just 50 feet above the waves, the Merlin engine finally seized up. With an eerie silence replacing the frantic clamour of action, the Spitfire hit the water, 15 miles from Hartlepool, at about 65 mph. "The aircraft immediately dug its nose in and came to a vertical position tail up and sank at once. I think the touchdown and sinking were simultaneous", recalled Ryder.

Having extracted himself from the cockpit, and after struggling to top-up his Mae West in the rolling surf, Ryder was soon picked up by one of the trawlers. Despite being at the controls of the first Spitfire to be shot down in action, and, in fact, the first RAF aircraft lost in the defence of the UK in World War Two, for his actions that day, Ryder was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

THE FIRST VC OF WORLD WAR TWO


Taken from *Admiral Hipper*, this picture shows another view of *Glowworm* during the battle. (via Historic Military Press)

It was during Sunday, April 7, 1940, that the Kriegsmarine began moving in preparation for Operation *Weserübung*, the codename for Hitler's assault on Denmark and Norway that was due to be launched on the 9th.

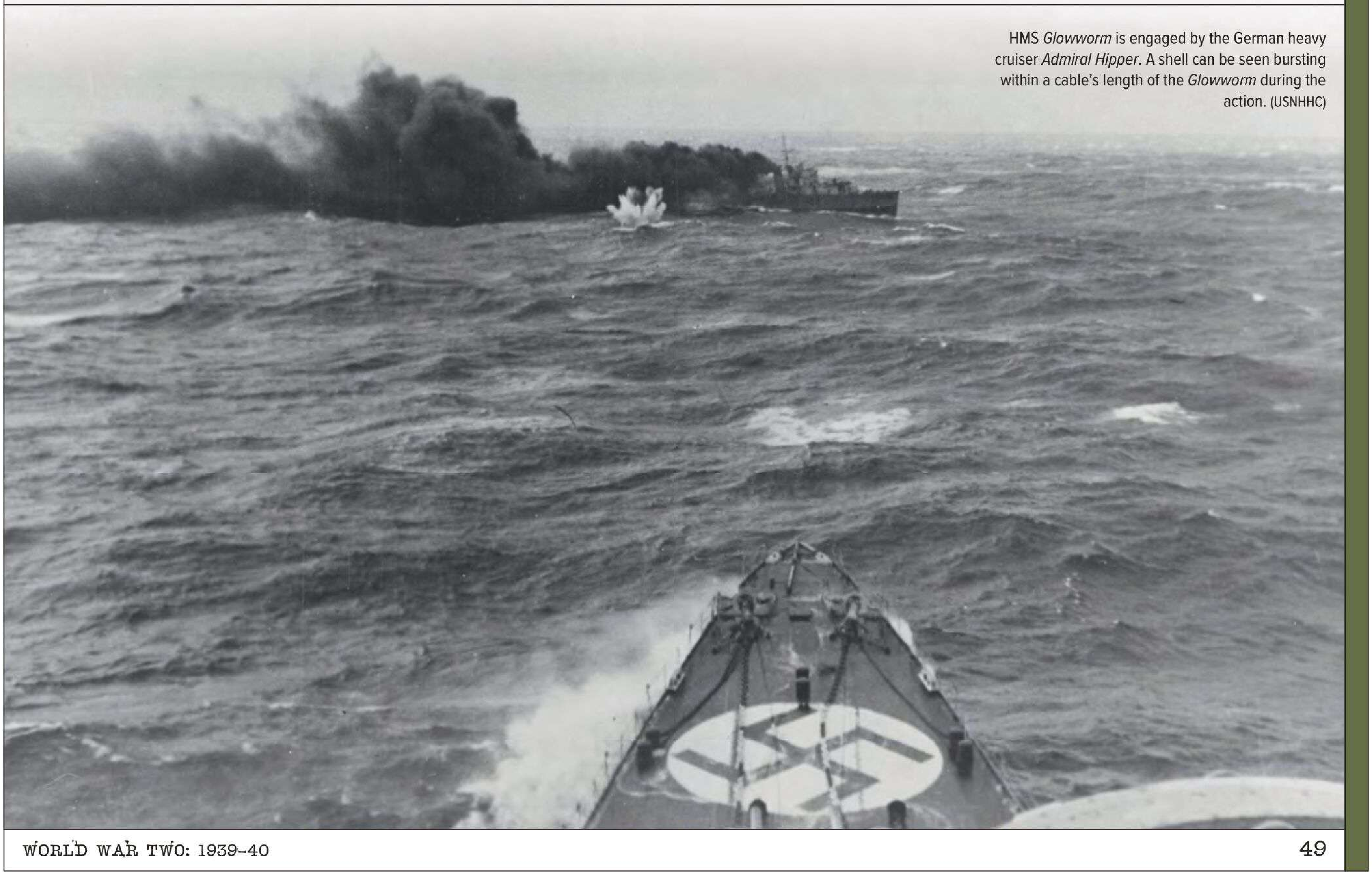
When initial reports of the movement of a large number of German warships towards Norway were received in London, the Admiralty Intelligence Division determined that "these reports are of doubtful value and may well be only a further move in the war of nerves". Soon, however, the reality of the situation became clearer and the reports were verified. The German vessels at sea included the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, two light cruisers and fourteen destroyers. This force now threatened a British mine-laying flotilla which, bound for the waters off southern Norway, included the battlecruiser HMS *Renown* and its escorting destroyers *Glowworm*, *Greyhound*, *Hero* and *Hyperion*.

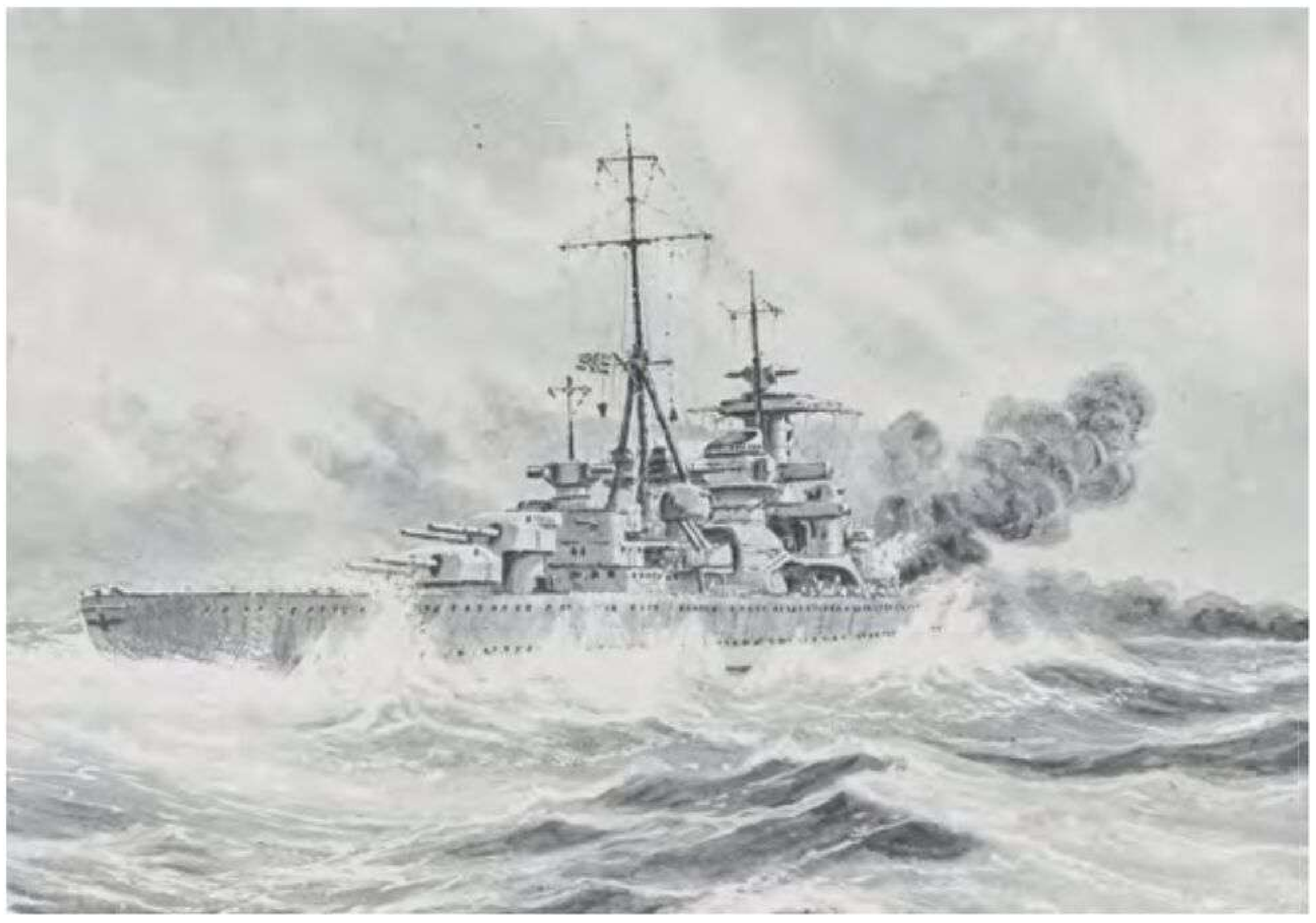
Beset by problems, including a man overboard on the 6th and a gyrocompass that had jumped off its mountings, the destroyer HMS *Glowworm*, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Gerard Broadmead Roope, had become separated from the rest of its force. By dawn on April 8, *Glowworm* was north-west of the Norwegian port of Trondheim. The weather was still bad with visibility down to a few miles. The crew had just been stood-down from the dawn action stations when Roope heard the shouted instruction "Hard-a-port! Get it on, man; full speed!" A German destroyer had been spotted through the gloom.

Without hesitating Roope engaged the German ship, firing the first shots of the battle for Norway. The enemy destroyer returned fire but then turned and fled into the mist – but not before *Glowworm* had got off another salvo. Then another enemy destroyer came into view.

Glowworn engaged this second target – the destroyer *Bernd von Arnim* – and a running battle ensued. The German ship, seemingly less able to cope with the weather, not only damaged her foreship and bridge, but nearly capsized as it manoeuvred at high speed in the heavy seas. It turned away to follow the first destroyer – with *Glowworm* in pursuit. It was at this point that the towering bulk of *Admiral Hipper* was spotted.

As the author J E Macdonnell wrote in his book *Valiant Occasions*, Roope and his torpedo-control officer, Lieutenant Robert Ramsay, "stared in rigid dismay across the smoking sea at the innumerable platforms, spotting tops, bridges and control towers prolonging themselves into a ranged symmetry of steel narrowing into the sky. Ahead of this cliff of steel, ugly and menacing on her fo'c'sle, waterproof against the waves washing white from her stem to superstructure, squatted her forrard turrets. *Glowworm*'s bridge could not see the guns reaching from them – they were pointing at it."


HMS *Glowworm* is engaged by the German heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. A shell can be seen bursting within a cable's length of the *Glowworm* during the action. (USNHHC)



A German propaganda drawing depicting *Admiral Hipper* engaging HMS *Glowworm* on April 8, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

Roope's first thoughts were to report the sighting of the German vessels. By the time that he received confirmation that his message had been received, *Admiral Hipper* had already opened fire with her eight-inch guns at a range of 8,400 metres. The time was 09.58 hours.

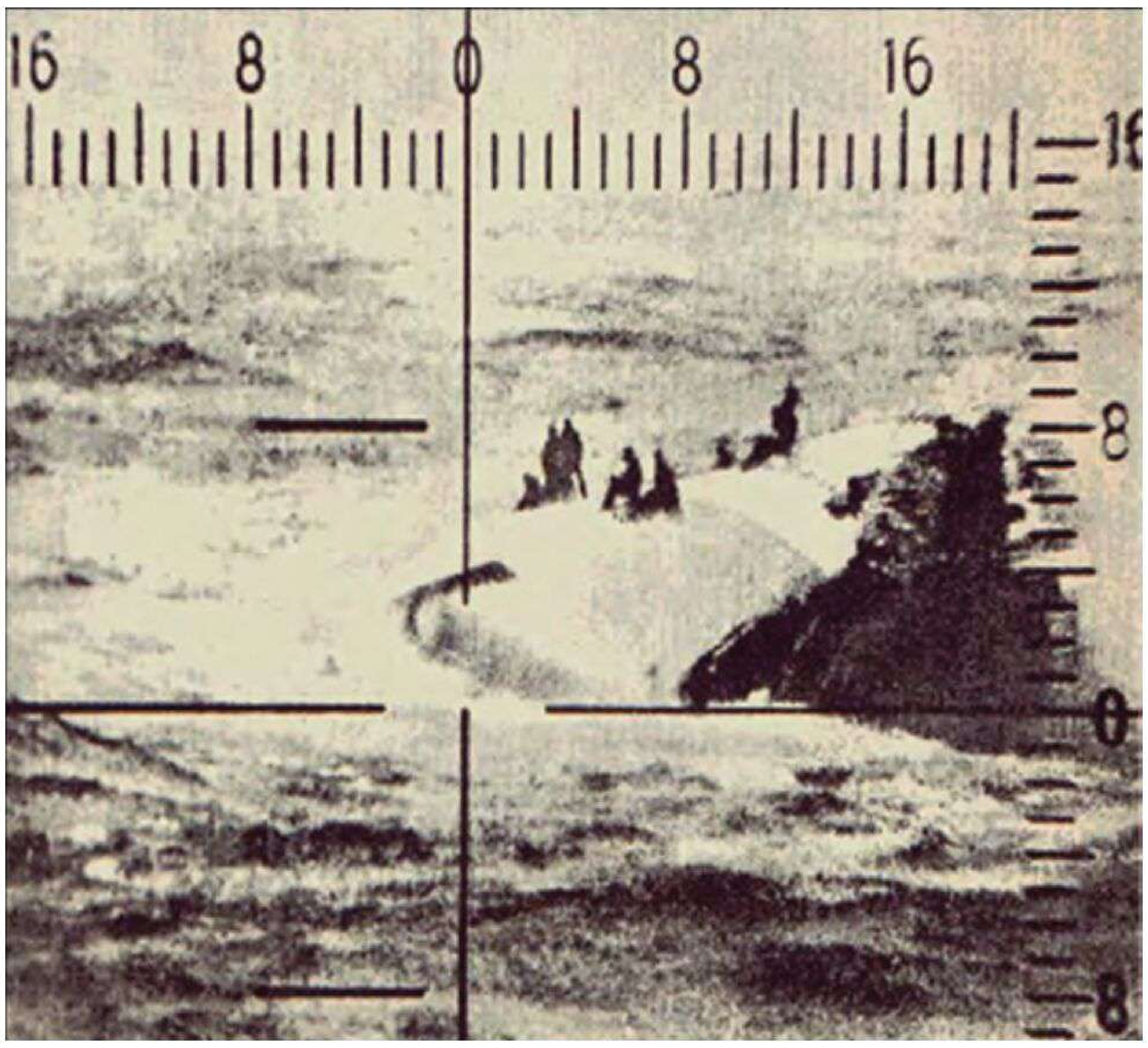
The first shells smashed into *Glowworm*'s starboard side between the bridge and the funnel. Round after round came crashing in on the British destroyer and, after a fourth salvo hit *Glowworm*, Roope ordered smoke to conceal his ship.

Admiral Hipper pursued relentlessly, determined to finish off the impudent little destroyer. Using its radar, it was able to track *Glowworm*, allowing the cruiser to continue firing its big guns into the smoke. The destroyer then emerged from the smoke and the cruiser's secondary armament, its 10.5cm guns, were now brought into action to add to the barrage.

The British destroyer had taken many hits and the radio room and wireless aerial were destroyed, preventing any further communication with HMS *Renown*. Nothing more was heard from *Glowworm*.

After numerous evasive manoeuvres and the firing of a number of torpedoes, it dawned on Roope that he was fast running out of options. He had only one trick left up his sleeve, as Able Seaman Duncan Blair recalled: "We had dived back into the smoke screen. When we came out the Captain said 'Stand by to ram'!"

The destroyer hit *Admiral Hipper* just behind her starboard anchor on the crest of a wave at speed, gouging open several holes in the hull and destroying her forward starboard torpedo mounting. The heavy cruiser took on some 500 tons of water before the leaks could be isolated.

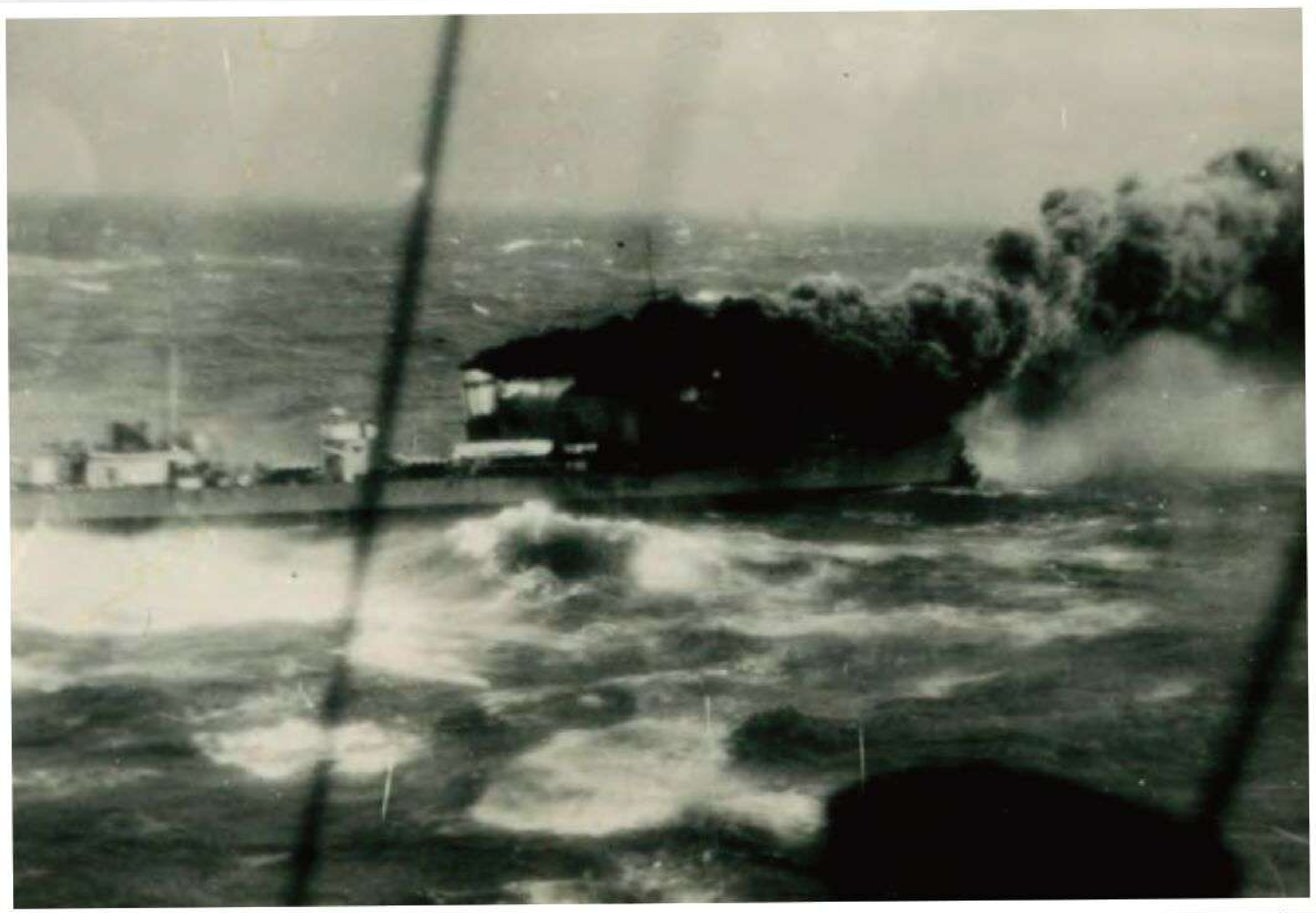


Survivors from HMS *Glowworm* cling to a piece of the wreckage. This photograph, which appeared in a German newspaper, was taken through one of *Admiral Hipper*'s gun sights. (Historic Military Press)

"There was a grinding crunch as the destroyer's bows crumpled against the cruiser's armoured plating," Ramsay recalled in 1945. "Men fell to the deck in a welter of blood and sea water, fire and smoke."

"The lights went out, the ship rolled and tossed and suddenly seemed to settle well on her starboard side," noted Stoker Bert Harris. "Then came the order to abandon ship. We had just made our last big play."

As *Glowworm* drew away from *Admiral Hipper*, the destroyer's remaining operable guns continued firing. Then, at 10.24 hours, *Glowworm*'s boilers exploded. After floating bottom-up for a few moments, *Glowworm* finally slipped beneath the waves. Only 40 British sailors were recovered by *Admiral Hipper*, though at least six later died of their wounds. Ramsay was the most senior survivor; Roope had drowned before he was rescued.



The badly-damaged HMS *Glowworm* pictured in the moments after she had rammed the *Admiral Hipper*. The extensive damage to the destroyer's bows can clearly be seen. (Courtesy of Maurice Laarman)

Exhausted survivors from *Glowworm* cling to nets thrown by *Admiral Hipper*'s crew. Some accounts state that Lieutenant-Commander Roope, assisting other survivors from his ship, managed to get to a rope thrown from *Admiral Hipper* but was too exhausted to hold on and he slipped back into the water. (Courtesy of Maurice Laarman)

It was not until the survivors were repatriated at the end of the war that the full story of *Glowworm*'s conduct was told. For his actions that day, Ramsay was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. For his part, Roope was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. Though not gazetted until more than five years after the event, it was, chronologically speaking, the first of World War Two.

In reaching their decision, the Honours and Awards Committee had the unusual opportunity to refer to evidence provided by an enemy commander, namely *Admiral Hipper*'s captain, Kapitän zur See *Hellmuth Heye. So impressed had Heye been by Roope's and Glowworm*'s defiant stand, that he had subsequently written to the British authorities via the Red Cross, providing a statement of the valiant courage shown whilst engaging a much superior ship in close battle.

Operation *Weserübung* underway as German tanks are pictured moving through Åbenrå on April 9, 1940. (Danish National Archives)

INVASION OF DENMARK AND NORWAY

In March 1940, in a move principally intended to halt the export of iron ore from Sweden to Germany, which was vital to the Third Reich's heavy industry, the British government drew up plans to invade Norway. Hitler, however, was only too aware of the threat posed by any joint Anglo-French action and accordingly set in motion his own countermoves.

There was another reason behind the Fuhrer's interest in the Scandinavian region. As far back as October 3, 1939, Grossadmiral Erich Raeder, the Kriegsmarine's supreme commander, had been present during a naval staff meeting when the topic of acquiring naval bases in Norway, primarily to support Germany's U-boat fleet, was raised. The intention was, detail the official minutes, to gain a "fundamental improvement in our strategic and operational situation". Six days later the German naval staff published a paper on the proposals, in which it was noted that Trondheim would be the most suitable port. On October 6, Raeder brought the subject up during a meeting with Hitler, who, in turn, agreed to "consider the matter".

On November 25, Raeder raised the prospect that the British, who would be only aware of the dangers posed by a German presence in Norway, might seek to take pre-emptive control of coastal bases in the region. The debate rumbled on until January 27, 1940, when General Keitel issued an order from Hitler for the formation of a special staff charged with drawing up plans for the invasion of Norway under Operation *Weserübung*.

The events surrounding *Altmark* on February 16 appear to have focused Hitler's attention on the region. Five days later, General Niklaus von Falkenhorst, who had served in Finland in 1918, was called to the Führer's headquarters. There he was placed in charge of the planning for *Weserübung*. Von Falkenhorst was also told that the offensive would include Denmark, the occupation of which was considered vital to protect the various routes to Norway.

Hitler's official directive for the occupation of the two countries was issued on March 1, 1940. According to this document, the three justifications for the offensive were: 1) The need to forestall British action in the region; 2) secure and safeguard Germany's supply of Swedish iron ore; and 3) improve the Kriegsmarine's and Luftwaffe's positions in respect of their operations against the UK. Despite strenuously defending their neutrality, both Norway and Denmark were about to be drawn into the war against their wishes. The first German warships sailed for their part in the landings on April 3.

A Danish motorcycle patrol in Åbenrå on the morning of April 9, 1940, before the town fell to German armoured units. (Danish National Archives)

WESER DAY: DENMARK

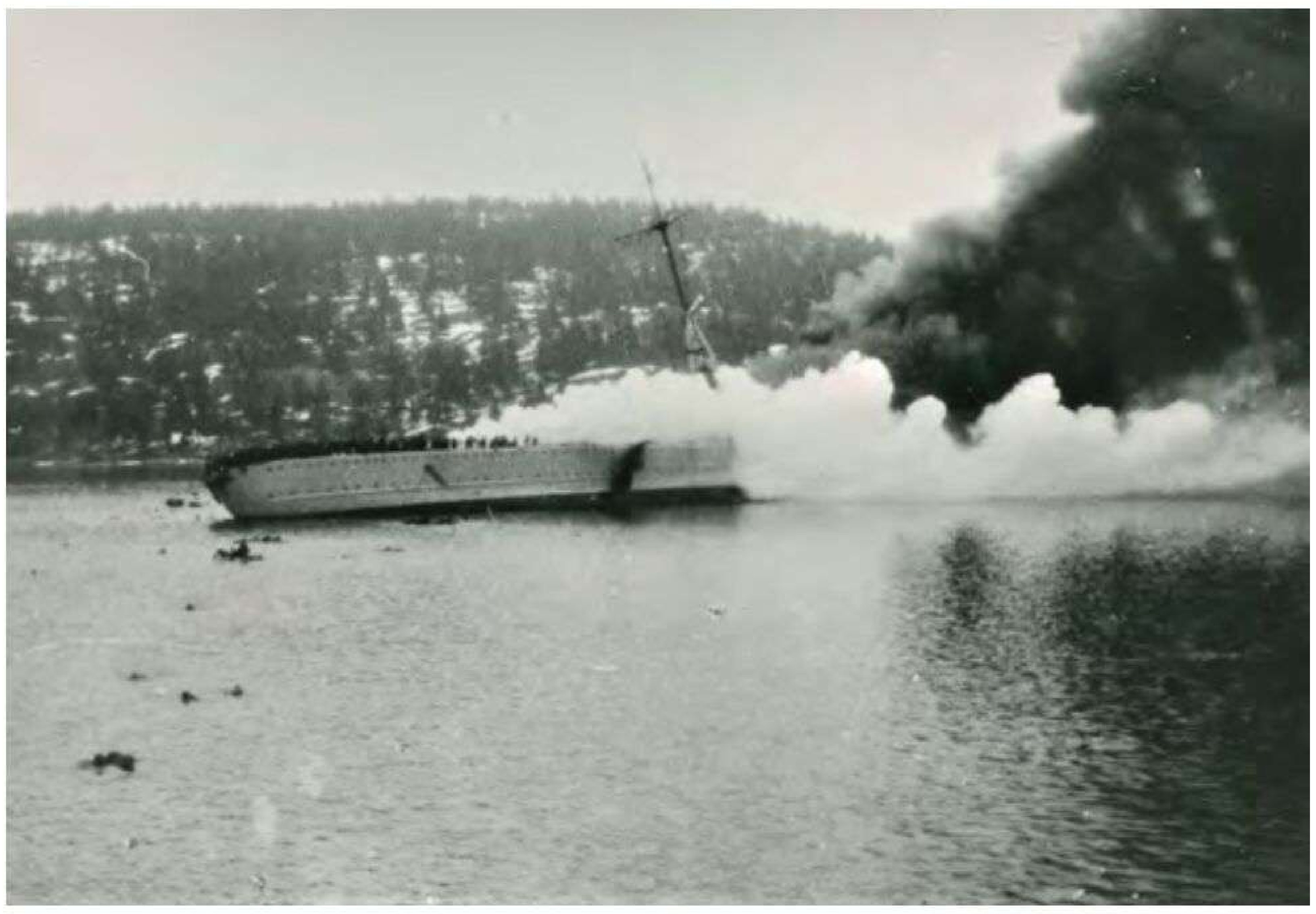
Operation *Weserübung* began in the early hours of April 9, at which point troops and armoured units poured over the border into Denmark. At about the same time, at 04.20 hours, a reinforced battalion of German infantrymen from the 308th Regiment landed in Copenhagen harbour from the minelayer *Hansestadt Danzig*, quickly capturing the Danish garrison at the Citadel. Elsewhere, the Danish Navy was presented with little opportunity to intervene, the air force was destroyed on the ground and parts of the army could do little other than remain in their barracks.

Though some units gallantly attempted to stall the invaders, particularly in Jutland, when the Germans threatened to obliterate Copenhagen from the air if the Danes did not surrender, King Christian X and his government, bowing to the inevitable, capitulated at about 06.00 hours. The shortest military campaign conducted by the Germans during World War Two had lasted just a few hours. Norway, however, turned out to be a much harder nut to crack.

WESER DAY: NORWAY

At the same time as Hitler's forces were busy subjugating Denmark, they also began landing, by sea and from the air, in Norway, invasion forces being despatched to Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, Kristiansand, Egersund and Oslo. In many places, the resistance the Germans encountered was more determined than it had been in Denmark.

At Kristiansand, for example, the cruiser *Karlsruhe* was damaged during a two-hour-long duel with Norwegian coastal artillery, before being sunk later the same day by the Royal Navy's submarine HMS *Truant*. At Bergen, Norwegian fortifications also damaged the light cruiser *Königsberg* and the artillery training ship *Bremse*, though, as at Kristiansand, the invaders eventually forced a surrender on the defenders.


The cruiser *Blücher* sinking during the Battle of Drøbak Sound on April 9, 1940. (National Archives of Norway)

German troops marching through Oslo in the hours immediately after its capture on April 9, 1940. (via Historic Military Press)

Watched by a crowd of inquisitive Danes, German troops continue disembarking on the quayside at Langelinie in Copenhagen, from the minelayer *Hansestadt Danzig*, early in the morning of April 9. The landings at this location were unopposed and the Germans troops soon had Copenhagen under their control. (Danish National Archives)

Pictured from the German cruiser *Blücher*, one of the German naval forces is pictured on its way to Norway in preparation for Operation *Weserübung*. (National Archives of Norway)

One key victory for the Norwegians came with the Battle of Drøbak Sound, an engagement that, to many, marked the end of the Phoney War. An invasion force led by the cruiser *Blücher* was making its way up Oslofjord, with the intention of capturing Oslo, when it was engaged by the gun and torpedo batteries of Oscarsborg Fortress. Opening fire at 04.21 hours, the barrage was so effective that *Blücher* was sunk. The cruiser *Lützow* was also damaged and, believing that *Blücher* had entered a minefield, withdrew back down Oslofjord to unload her troops at the small town of Son, some fifteen miles from their intended point of disembarkation.

Onboard *Blücher* had been many of the individuals who were to form a new administration to replace the Norwegian government. The latter, who gained valuable time through *Blücher*'s loss, as well as the delay caused to the troops on *Lützow*, was evacuated north, along with King Haakon VII.

That afternoon, as much of Norway fought on, the Germans allowed Vidkun Quisling to form a puppet government; Hitler officially recognised the new Norwegian regime within 24 hours. Oslo itself fell during the afternoon of April 9, captured by *Fallschirmjäger flown into nearby* Fornebu airport. Though Quisling broadcast to the nation informing his fellow Norwegians of their new government, with himself as Prime Minister, many chose to ignore the proclamation and his instructions. The King also signalled his, and his legitimate government's, intention to fight on.

Under a new commander-in-chief, General Otto Ruge, Norway's remaining armed forces began what can best be described as a fighting retreat. However, the ill-equipped forces that he commanded proved insufficient as the German war machine gained momentum, assisted by total air superiority. Much hope was placed on the support that might be forthcoming from the British and French – though, to others, this would turn out to be a case of "too little and too late".

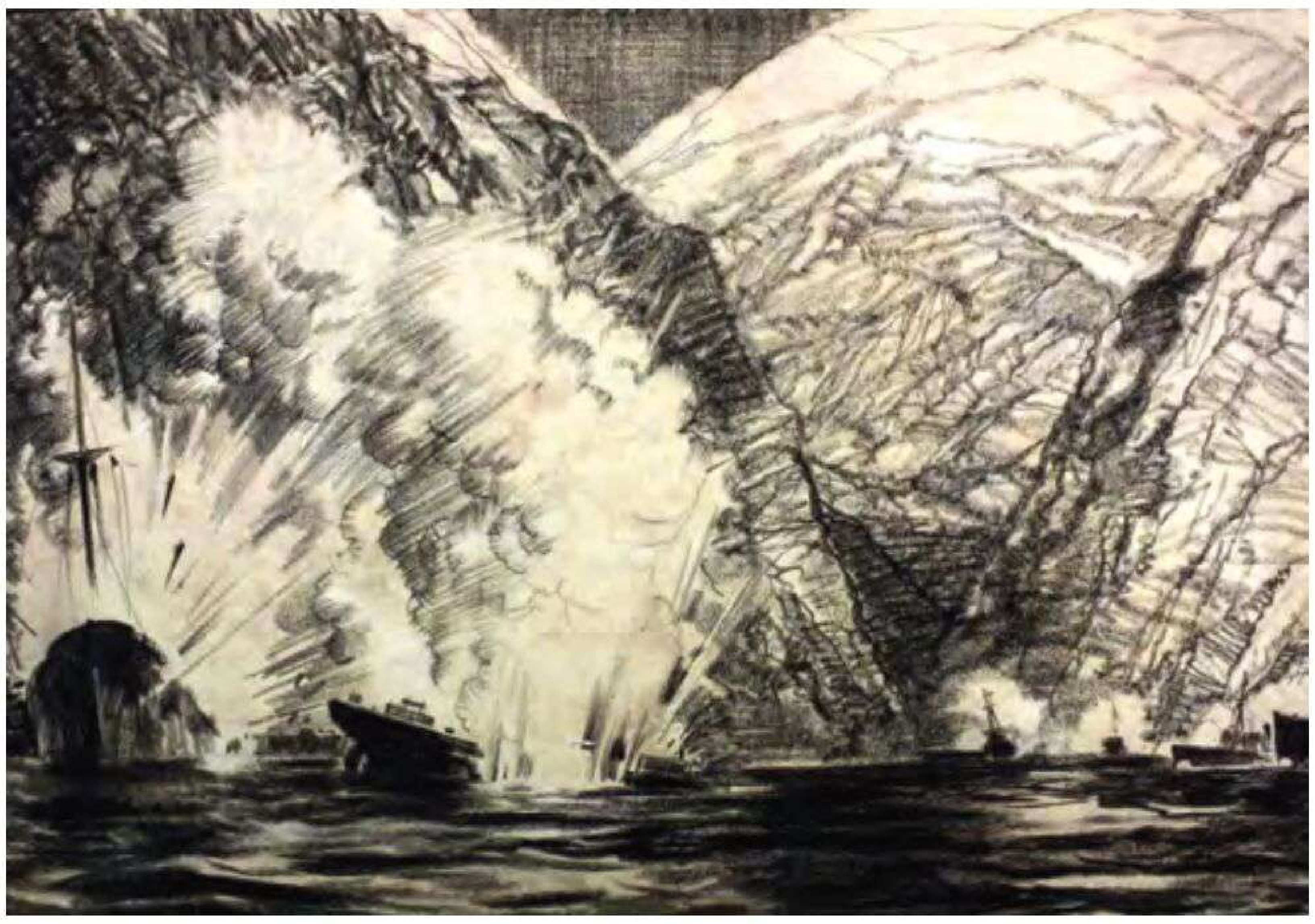
From the British Government's perspective, much of its initial response to Operation *Weserübung* was delivered by the Royal Navy, though many of the warships involved immediately found themselves at the mercy of the Luftwaffe. On April 9, the battleship *Rodney* was, for example, damaged by a 1,000lb bomb, the cruisers *Glasgow*, *Southampton* and *Devonshire* all slightly damaged by near-misses, and the destroyer *Gurkha* sunk while en route to Bergen to investigate reports of a German cruiser.

The following day, the Royal Navy engaged German surface vessels in Ofotfjord. Leading to the strategic town of Narvik, Ofotfjord is Norway's 12th longest fjord and lies some 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle. When an enemy force was reported in the fjord, the task of eliminating the threat was handed to Captain Bernard Armitage Warburton Warburton-Lee, the commander of the Royal Navy's 2nd Destroyer Flotilla which included the destroyers *Hardy*, *Havock*, *Hostile*, *Hotspur* and *Hunter*.

Warburton-Lee informed the Admiralty that the "Norwegians report Germans holding Narvik in force also 6 destroyers and 1 submarine are there, and channel is possibly mined". He concluded his brief signal with the simple sentence, "Intend attacking at dawn, high water".

Warburton-Lee's destroyers struck at dawn on April 10. The German destroyers *Hermann Künne* and *Hans Lüdemann* were anchored alongside the tanker *Jan Wellem* and in the process of refuelling when the British destroyers' attack began at 04.30 hours. *Hardy* led the way, engaging destroyers and shore batteries with guns and torpedoes. After withdrawing to regroup, Waburton-Lee, believing that much of the opposition had been silenced, decided to return to the attack.

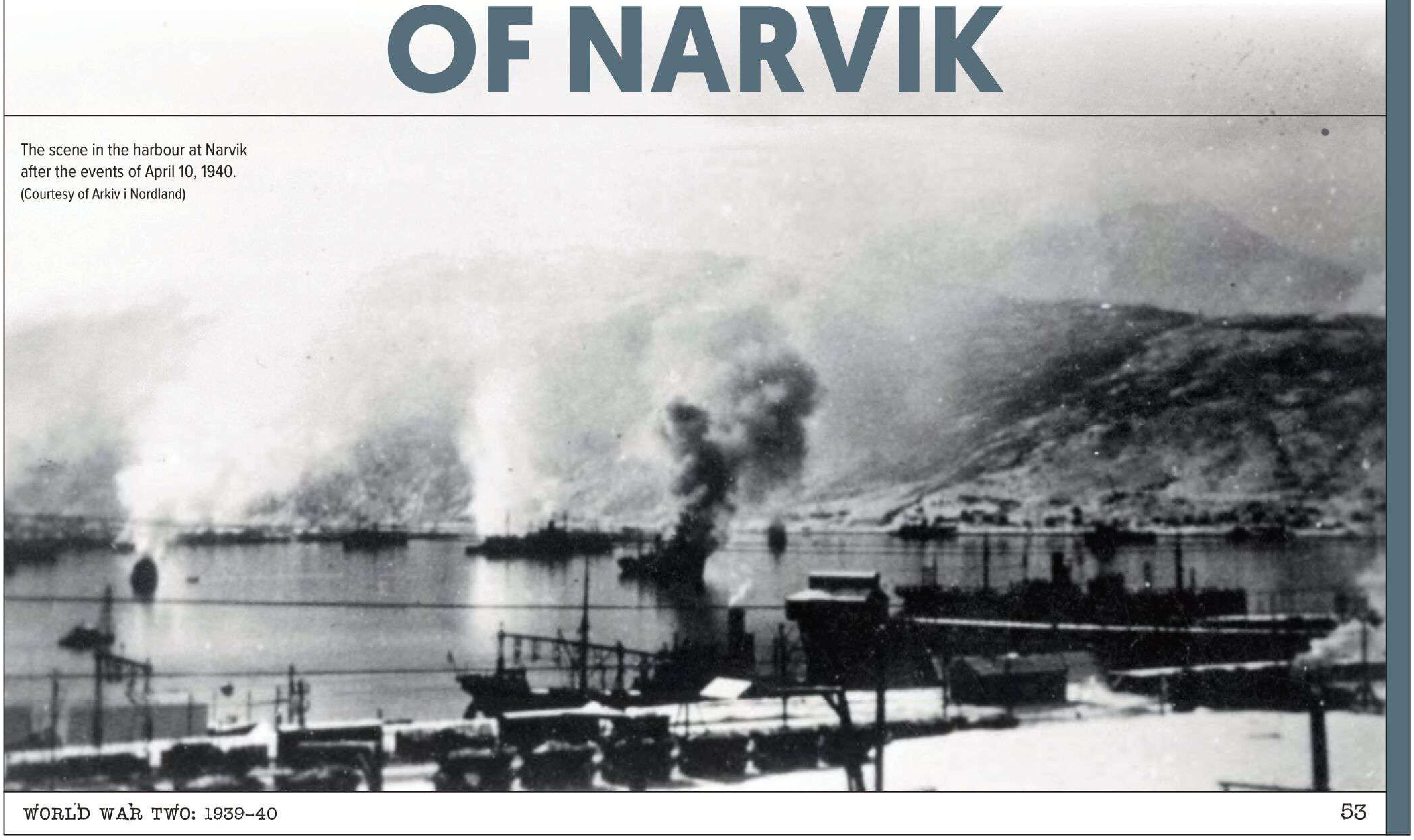
As he steamed back up Ofotfjord, two or three enemy warships came down the fjord to meet him. Warburton-Lee did not survive the subsequent battle, and his citation for the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross provides a brief description of events: "Captain Warburton led his flotilla of five destroyers up the fjord in heavy snow-storms, arriving off Narvik just after daybreak. He took the enemy completely by surprise and made three successful attacks on warships and merchantmen in the harbour. As the flotilla withdrew, five enemy destroyers of superior gunpower were encountered and engaged. The captain was mortally wounded by a shell which hit the bridge of HMS *Hardy*. His last signal was 'Continue to engage the enemy'."

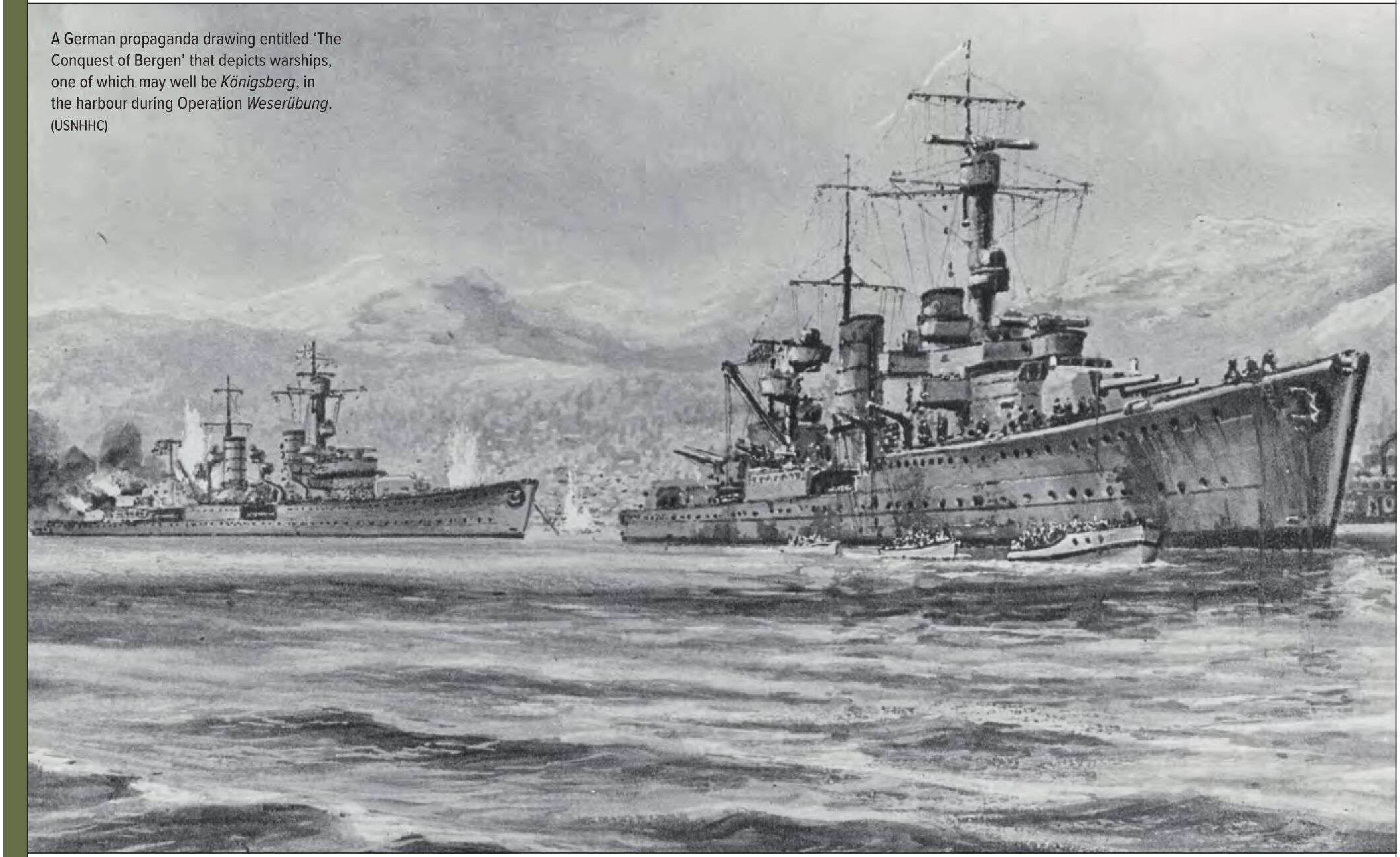

A contemporary artist's depiction of the action during the First Battle of Narvik for which Captain Bernard Armitage Warburton Warburton-Lee was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. (Historic Military Press)

By the time that the surviving British destroyers withdrew, the flotilla leader *Hardy* had been beached and was on fire, whilst *Hunter* had been torpedoed and sunk. A third destroyer, *Hotspur*, was also damaged badly by a torpedo, her steering gear and bridge communications put out of action, but managed to extricate herself. Admiral Sir W M James later wrote that "it was not possible to estimate accurately the enemy's losses. It was known that seven or eight merchant ships had been sunk, including the German ammunition ship *Ranafels*, which blew up, and two or three destroyers had been damaged."

Warburton-Lee's award of the VC was the first to be gazetted in World War Two.

FIRST BATTLE OF NARVIK


The scene in the harbour at Narvik after the events of April 10, 1940. (Courtesy of Arkiv i Nordland)



A German propaganda drawing entitled 'The Conquest of Bergen' that depicts warships, one of which may well be *Königsberg*, in the harbour during Operation *Weserübung*. (USNHHC)

KÖNIGSBERG SUNK

As, in the words of Admiral Sir W M James, Captain Warburton-Lee's "stirring action was being fought out" at Narvik, the Royal Navy was also in action hundreds of miles further south at Bergen. This time it was the aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm that was on the attack, and the target the cruiser *Königsberg*, which the destroyer *Gurkha* had been en route to when she was sunk the previous day.

Königsberg was part of the force that had been despatched to capture Bergen at the beginning of Operation *Weserübung*. She had been damaged by the Norwegian coastal artillery and required repair before she could return to Germany. For this reason, as well as her unreliable engines, she anchored in the harbour. Her broadside was intentionally facing the harbour entrance so that all of her main guns could be brought to bear in the event of an attack by the British.

In fact, the Royal Navy would make an appearance within hours, but from the air and not by sea. Before *Königsberg* could be moved to safety, it was the Fleet Air Arm that had been ordered to finish her off. That task was duly handed to the crews of Nos. 800 and 803 Naval Air Squadrons which, equipped with the Blackburn Skua, were based at the naval air station at Hatston in the Orkney Islands.

The 16 aircraft available for the mission took off at 05.15 hours on the morning of April 10, forming up into two groups before heading out over the North Sea. The Skuas reached Bergen without incident, approaching the target from the south-east. At 07.20 hours they formed line astern to begin their attack which, coming out of the sun, took the Germans completely by surprise.

The historian and author Peter C Smith explores the events that day in detail in his book *The History of Dive-Bombing*: "As the bombs screamed down, the cruiser was enveloped in smoke and flames, which made aerial observation and confirmation difficult. Two hits were claimed amidships and one on the forecastle, in addition to at least one near-miss.".

As Smith goes on to reveal, there was an independent witness to the attack, the master of the American freighter *Flying Fish*, Captain W E Wollaston. "One bomb struck the *Köln* [*sic*] squarely amidships, between the funnels", Wollaston later recalled in an interview. "We saw clouds of smoke and at 9.00am there was an explosion. The cruiser started sinking by the head. Flames were leaping 100 feet in the air as she sank deeper and deeper. Her stern went up in the air, showing her propeller, and 50 minutes later she capsized and sank as columns of smoke rose above her."

Königsberg was hit by at least five 500lb bombs. It took slightly less than three hours from the start of the attack for the ship to completely capsize and sink, which gave the crew enough time to evacuate many of the dead and wounded. Just one of the Skuas failed to return.

Four Royal Navy shore-based Blackburn Skuas lined up and ready to take off from HMS *Sparrowhawk*, Royal Naval Air Station Hatston, in the Orkneys during 1940.

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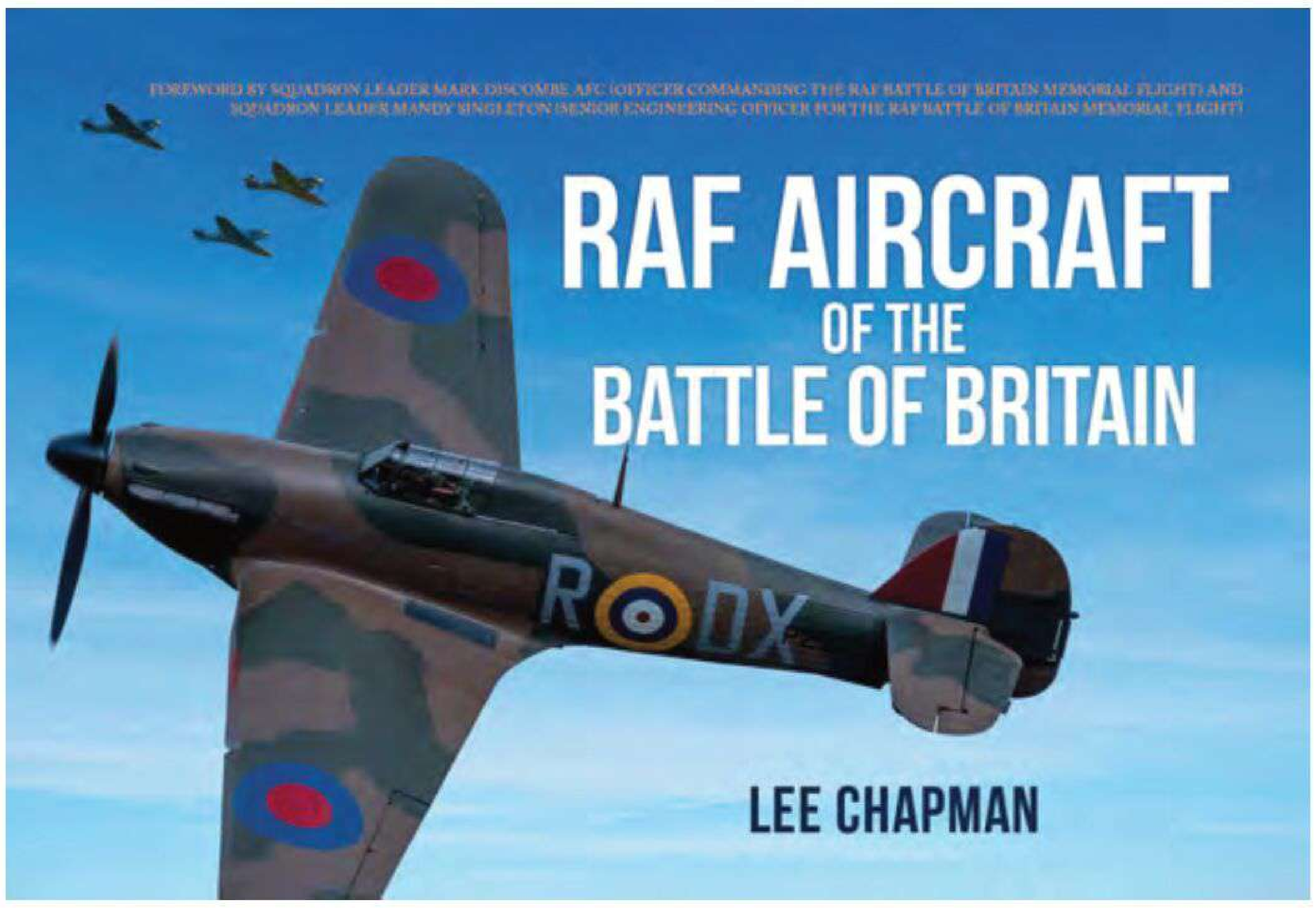
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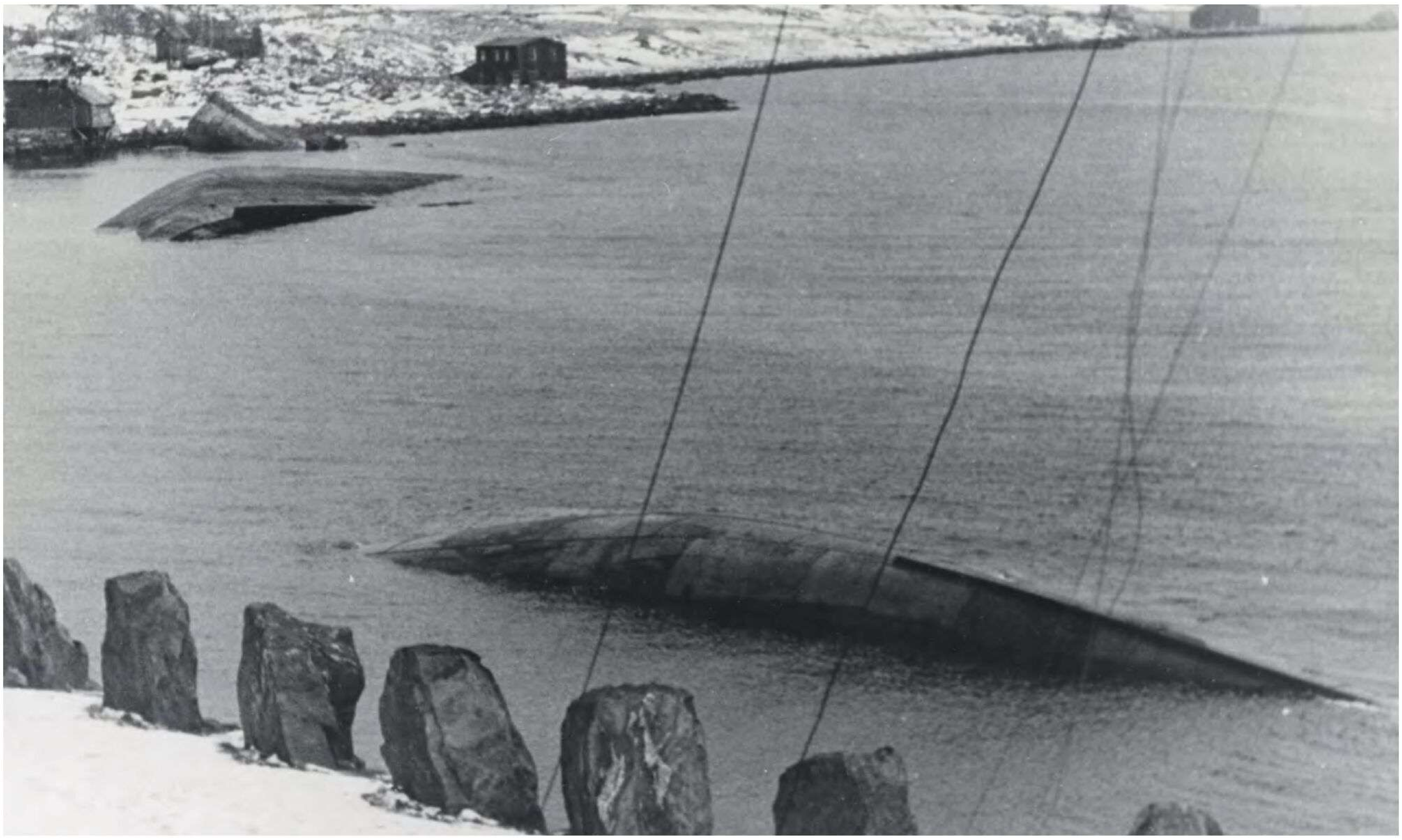
SECOND BATTLE OF NARVIK



Wrecks in Ofotfjord following the naval engagements at Narvik in April 1940. (USNHHC)

During the hectic first few days of Operation *Weserübung*, the war at sea was marked by a succession of attacks and counter-attacks. One of the largest of these engagements saw the Royal Navy return to Narvik on April 13, the intention being to complete the work that Captain Warburton-Lee had begun, and which cost him his life, three days earlier.

By the 13th, a force of nine destroyers had been assembled under the command of Vice-Admiral William Whitworth in the battleship HMS *Warspite*. Whitworth was informed by the Admiralty that the recapture of Narvik and the destruction of German ships in Ofotfjord was to take priority over all other operations.

In low cloud and light drizzle, Whitworth's flotilla arrived off Narvik to find that eight remaining German destroyers were trapped in the fjord. The British attack was spear-headed by HMS *Icarus*, which led the other destroyers up Ofotfjord whilst *Warspite* remained off-shore in support. As Warburton-Lee had done on the 10th, Whitworth also sent out a message: "We are proceeding to attack the defences of Narvik and any German war or merchant ships met. I am sure that any resistance on the part of the enemy will be dealt with in the most resolute and determined manner."

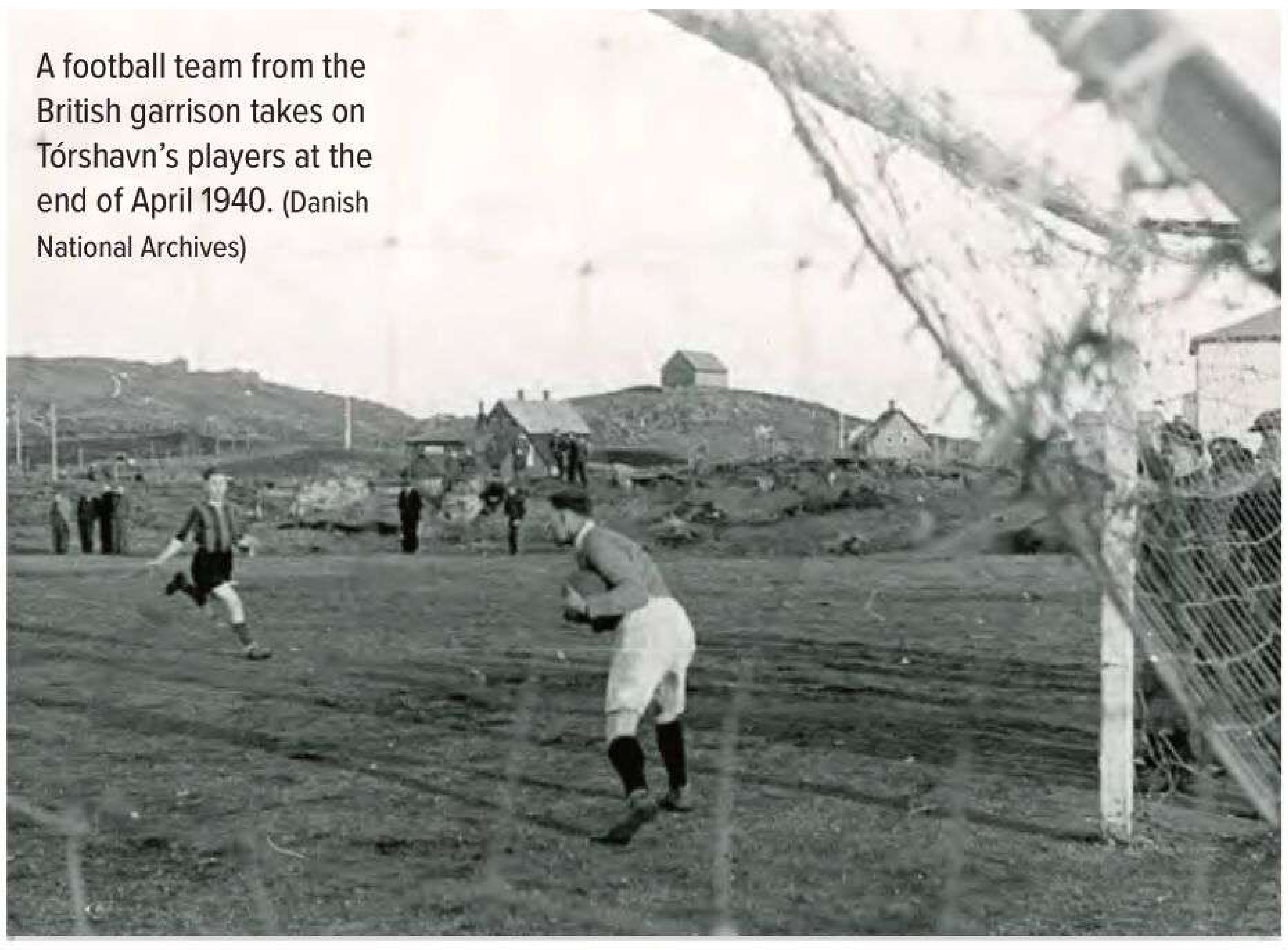
Admiral Sir W M James later provided the following account in *The British Navies in the Second World War*: "As the force proceeded up the fiord enemy destroyers showed up singly and were engaged. The first came under heavy fire from four of our destroyers and retired. Another emerged from a bay, where she had been reported by the *Warspite*'s aeroplane, and came under a murderous fire from three of our destroyers. She was sunk in a few minutes.

"More enemy destroyers appeared ahead zigzagging, and our destroyers went into a loose formation so as to bring their fire to bear. The battle developed into a series of running fights with the enemy retiring up the fiord, and the *Warspite* silencing the shore batteries. By 2pm three enemy ships had been destroyed and the remainder had fled up Ronhaks fiord [Rombaksfjord, the easternmost branch of the Ofotfjord] beyond Narvik.

"Off Narvik another destroyer was sunk, and the *Eskimo* then led four destroyers through the half-mile entrance where the enemy were last seen… They found three destroyers at the head of the fiord, two afloat, one aground. The beached destroyer fired her torpedoes and one blew off the bows of the *Eskimo*… It was hoped to make prize of one of the enemy's ships afloat, but one scuttled herself and the other was sunk by a torpedo." The only German ship which survived within the port area at Narvik was the submarine *U-51*.

Whilst the destroyers were at work in Ofotfjord, HMS *Warspite*'s Fairey Swordfish floatplane provided valuable assistance in the spotting role. On the same day, the Swordfish sighted, and attacked, the German U-boat *U-64* off Bjerkvik, to the north of Narvik. *U-64* was the first U-boat sunk by an aircraft in World War Two.

Part of the wreck of the German destroyer *Georg Thiele* can still be seen where she was beached on April 13, 1940 – as this image shows. (Scandphoto/Shutterstock)



A football team from the British garrison takes on Tórshavn's players at the end of April 1940. (Danish National Archives)

At the same time that German troops were pushing relentlessly northwards through Denmark following the start of Operation *Weserübung*, the British government ordered the implementation of Operation *Valentine*, this being the seizure of the strategically important Faroe Islands.

Located roughly halfway between Norway and Iceland, the Faroe Islands, an 18-strong group of volcanic outcrops some 200 miles north-west of Scotland, had, at the time, the status of being part of Denmark. Like a similar move against Iceland a month later, the occupation was intended to forestall any like move on the part of the Germans.

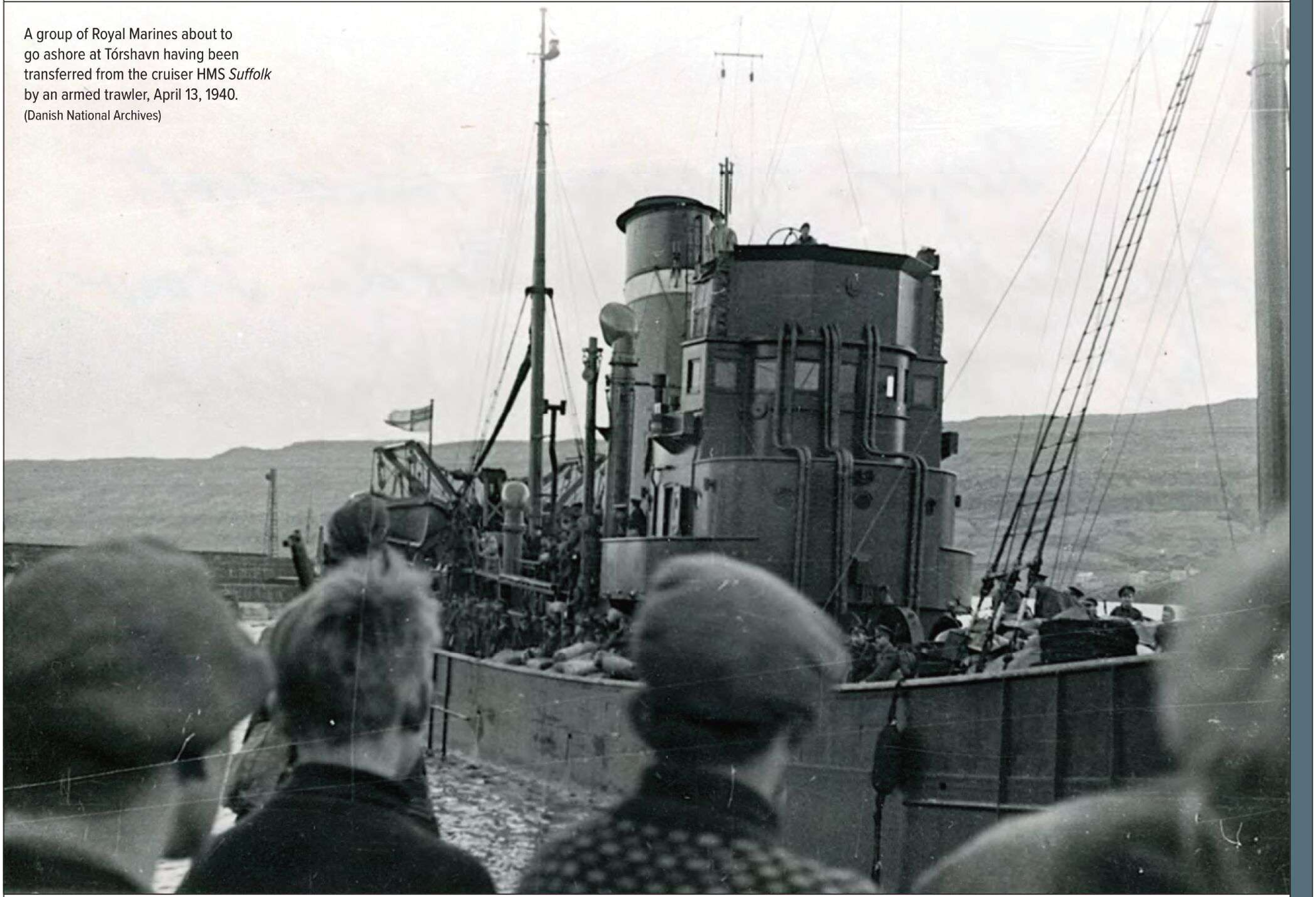
As First Lord of the Admiralty, it fell to Churchill to inform Parliament of the government's intentions. Speaking on April 11, he stated: "In my view, which is shared by my skilled advisers, Herr Hitler has committed a grave strategic error in spreading the war so far to the North and in forcing the Scandinavian people, or peoples, out of their attitude of neutrality. We have suffered from nothing in our blockade policy so much as the denial of the Norwegian coast, and that cursed corridor is now closed for ever.

"Hitler has effected with his Germans lodgments of various strengths at many points of the Norwegian coasts, and he has felled with a single hammer blow the inoffensive Kingdom of Denmark, but we shall take all we want off this Norwegian coast now, with an enormous increase in the facility and in the efficiency of our blockade. We are also at this moment occupying the Faroe Islands, which belong to Denmark and which are a strategic point of high importance, and whose people showed every disposition to receive us with warm regard. We shall shield the Faroe Islands from all the severities of war and establish ourselves there conveniently by sea and air until the moment comes when they will be handed back to the Crown and people of a Denmark liberated from the foul thraldom in which they have been plunged by the German aggression."

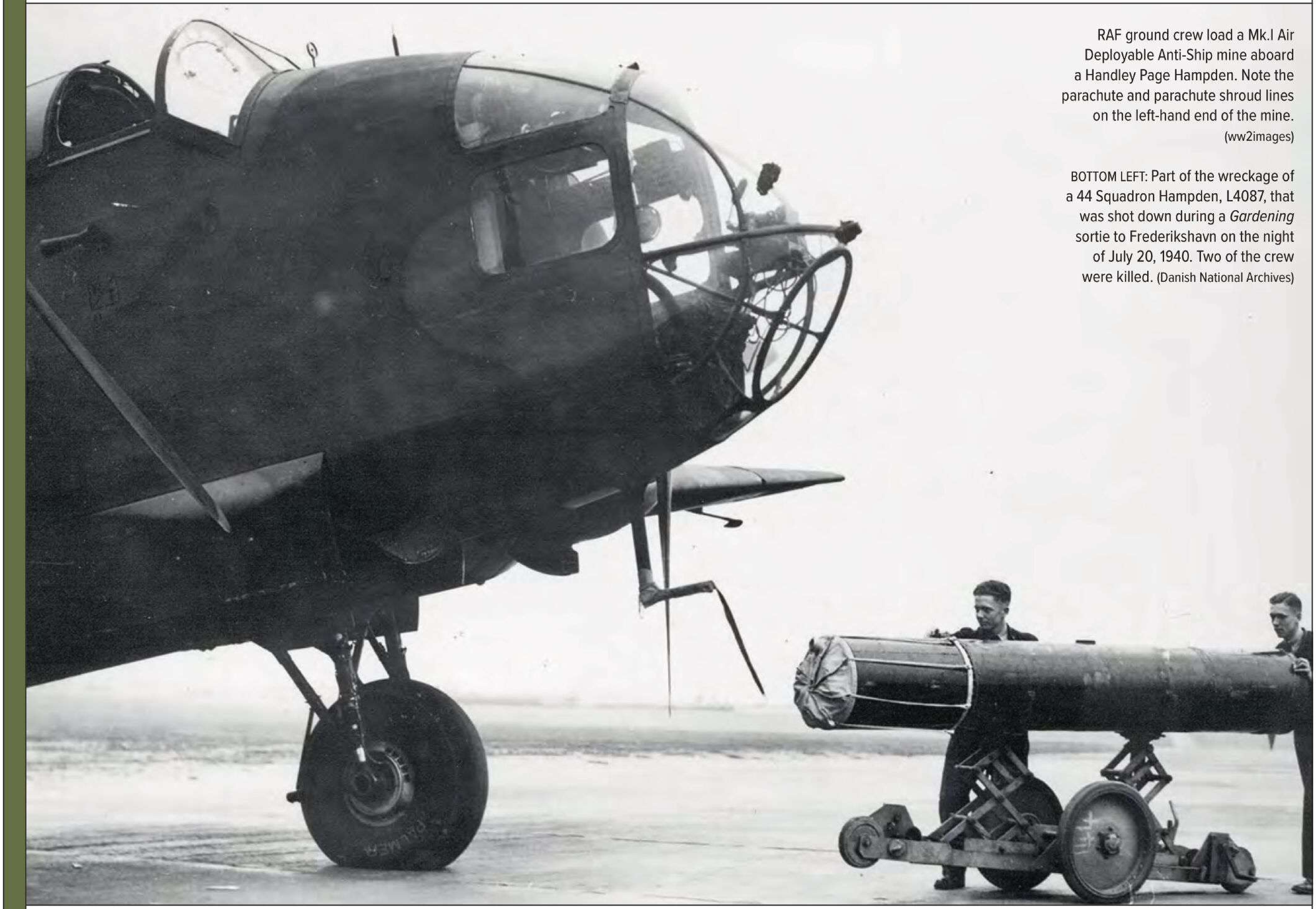
The following day, two Royal Navy destroyers arrived at Tórshavn, the Faroese capital. During a meeting with British officials, the Danish Prefect and senior members of the Faroese parliament bowed to the inevitable and allowed the occupation to proceed. This began in earnest on the 13th, when the cruiser HMS *Suffolk* docked. On board was a contingent of 250 Royal Marines that was to form the first garrison.

At the same time, Colonel T B W Sandall, who had been designated as the British military commander, and Frederick Mason, the new British Consul, then met with the Danish Prefect, Carl Aage Hilbert. After lodging what Sandall took to be formal protest, Hilbert duly accepted the British terms on the basis that the United Kingdom would not seek to interfere with the internal affairs of the islands.

OPERATION VALENTINE



A group of Royal Marines about to go ashore at Tórshavn having been transferred from the cruiser HMS *Suffolk* by an armed trawler, April 13, 1940. (Danish National Archives)



RAF ground crew load a Mk.I Air Deployable Anti-Ship mine aboard a Handley Page Hampden. Note the parachute and parachute shroud lines on the left-hand end of the mine. (ww2images)

BOTTOM LEFT: Part of the wreckage of a 44 Squadron Hampden, L4087, that was shot down during a *Gardening* sortie to Frederikshavn on the night of July 20, 1940. Two of the crew were killed. (Danish National Archives)

RAF MINELAYING STARTS

Though, as we have already seen, the Luftwaffe had been actively mining the coastal waters around the United Kingdom since soon after the outbreak of war, it was not until the night of April 13/14, 1940 that the RAF joined the Royal Navy in retaliating in a like manner.

When he was at the Air Ministry in the early 1930s, Wing Commander Arthur Harris had put forward a proposal to develop air-dropped mines. However, his plans floundered in politics as wrangling over whether the Air Ministry or the Admiralty should control the project dragged on.

Eventually spurred into action by the Luftwaffe, the British development of air-dropped mines was suddenly resurrected, with a degree of urgency, under joint RAF and Royal Navy control. The initial requirement was for a 1,500lb parachute-retarded mine (about half the weight would be explosive), able to withstand being dropped from heights of between 100 and 1,500 feet, and at 200mph. They were fitted with several time delay mechanisms to prevent them exploding when they hit the water, or if the aircraft crashed, while the detonators were magnetic. The first of the new mines were ready for use in the spring of 1940.

It was decided to maximise surprise and use the mines in the inshore lanes off Denmark. Hitler had just launched his invasions of Denmark and Norway. The coastal shipping lanes were being used to move men and supplies north, and raw materials to feed German wartime industry south. Given the distances involved and the weight of the mines, the job was handed to Bomber Command rather than the perhaps more obvious but considerably less well-equipped Coastal Command.

The only aircraft they had capable of the task were the Handley Page Hampdens of No.5 Group, under the command of the now Air Vice Marshal Arthur Harris. Aircraft from Nos. 49, 50 and 83 squadrons were tasked with the operation, taking off late on April 13, with orders to lay one mine each. A total of 15 Hampdens were despatched, 14 of them laying mines off Denmark in the sea lanes between German ports and Norway. One aircraft was lost.

One of the pilots that night was Guy Gibson, later of Dambuster fame: “For months we had hung around; for months we had waited for this. We had waited so long that we were all completely brassed off… The trip was completely uneventful. We found the spot. We saw our mines gurgle into the black water.”

Despite the late start, the RAF’s mine-laying sorties, known by the codename *Gardening*, would become a vital component of Bomber Command’s effort. Of the 48,060 air-dropped mines laid off the northern and western coasts of Europe by the end of the war, 47,152 had been laid by Bomber Command. For the loss of around 500 aircraft, these mines sank over 700 enemy-controlled ships and damaged over 550 more. This amounted to some 40% of all German-controlled shipping, more than twice the figure lost to Royal Navy surface and submarine forces.

BRITISH TROOPS LAND IN NORWAY

In an attempt to assist Norway's hard-pressed forces, the British government decided to assign land units to the campaign. The War Office's plan was to take Trondheim in a pincer movement; troops were to be landed at Åndalsnes to the south and Namsos to the north.

The first ashore were some 350 seamen and Royal Marines, all of whom disembarked at Namsos on April 14. They were to act as the covering force for the troops under the command of Major-General Carton de Wiart. At the same time, and much further north, efforts to capture Narvik saw the arrival of further troops onboard a series of transports escorted by the battleship HMS *Valiant*. Initial efforts to seize the town from the landward side met with success, at which point the Luftwaffe again intervened.

By April 28, any hope that the pincer movement around Trondheim would succeed was abandoned, in no small part because of a series of devastating air raids by the Luftwaffe on the vital ports and harbours needed to sustain the operation. The re-embarkation of 5,500 men at Åndalsnes was achieved over the nights of April 30 and May 1, whilst the 6,200 men at Namsos were lifted in one go on the night of May 2.

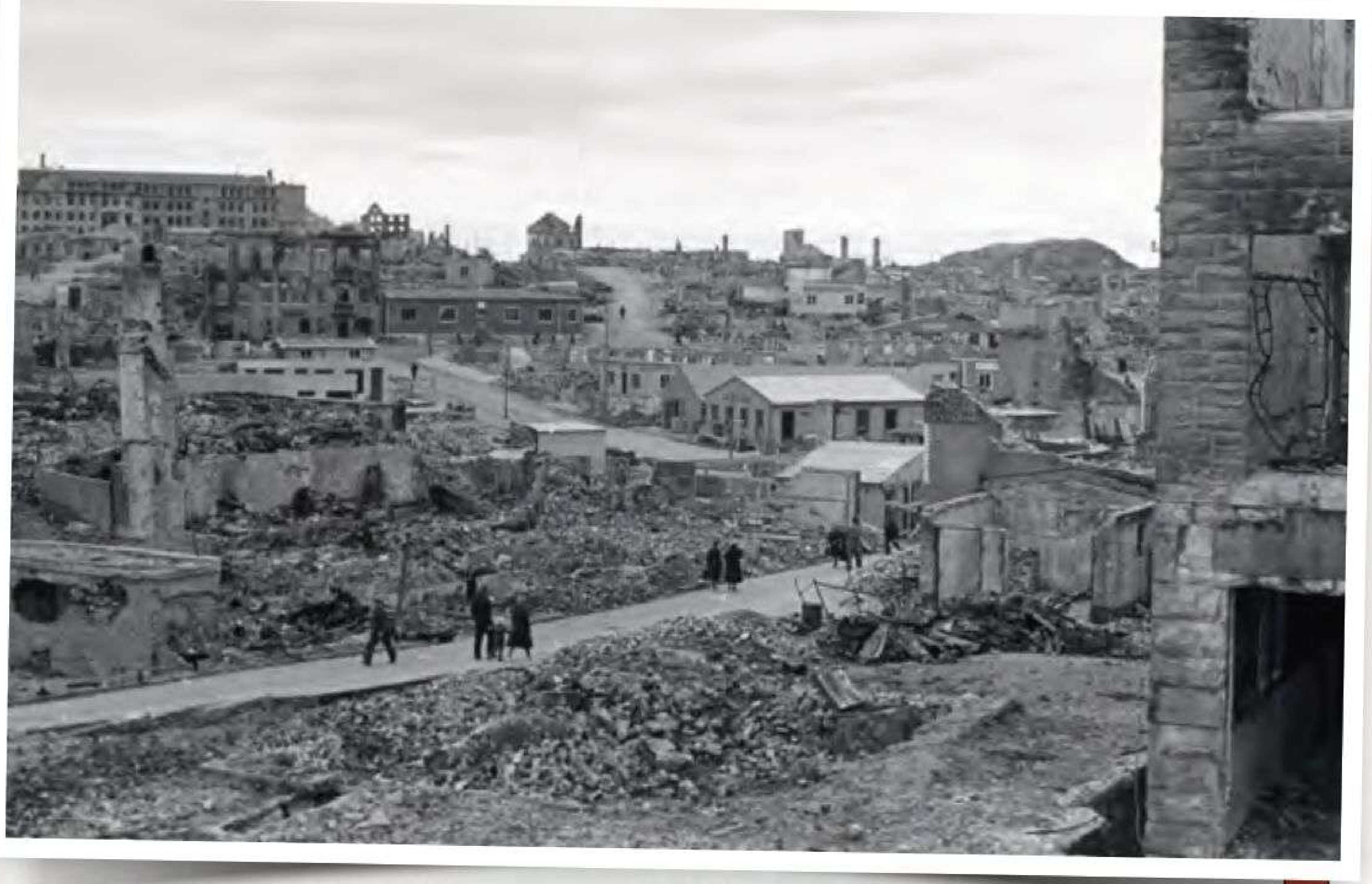
For the Allied troops battling away at Narvik, the situation soon stagnated. The Blitzkrieg upon France and the Low Countries on May 10 changed the strategic situation completely and attention was diverted away from Norway to the Battle of France.

Events moved very rapidly over the course of the next few days and as the BEF in Belgium retreated towards the Channel, the following signal was sent to Admiral Boyle: "His Majesty's Government has decided your forces are to evacuate Northern Norway at earliest moment. Reason for this is that the troops, ships, guns and certain equipment are urgently required for defence of United Kingdom."

The decision to evacuate Norway completely was made on May 24 under the codename Operation *Alphabet*. With the troops in direct contact with the enemy and subject to repeated air attacks, the evacuation was not straightforward and the very last British troops did not depart from Norway until June 8, 1940.

The Norwegian Campaign was a disaster for Chamberlain's government, despite a number of individual successes. It had also exposed the Royal Navy's inability, at that time, to contest command of the air off a distant shore.

Even before the last troops had been evacuated, the subject was hotly debated in Parliament, the so-called 'Norway Debate' lasting from May 7 to May 9, 1940. Described by some as the most far-reaching parliamentary debate of the twentieth century, it ended in the government surviving a vote of no confidence – but only just. In the days that followed, Chamberlain's last remaining support crumbled. He was forced to resign, ushering in a new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, despite the latter having been, as the First Lord of the Admiralty, one of the main architects of the Norwegian Campaign.



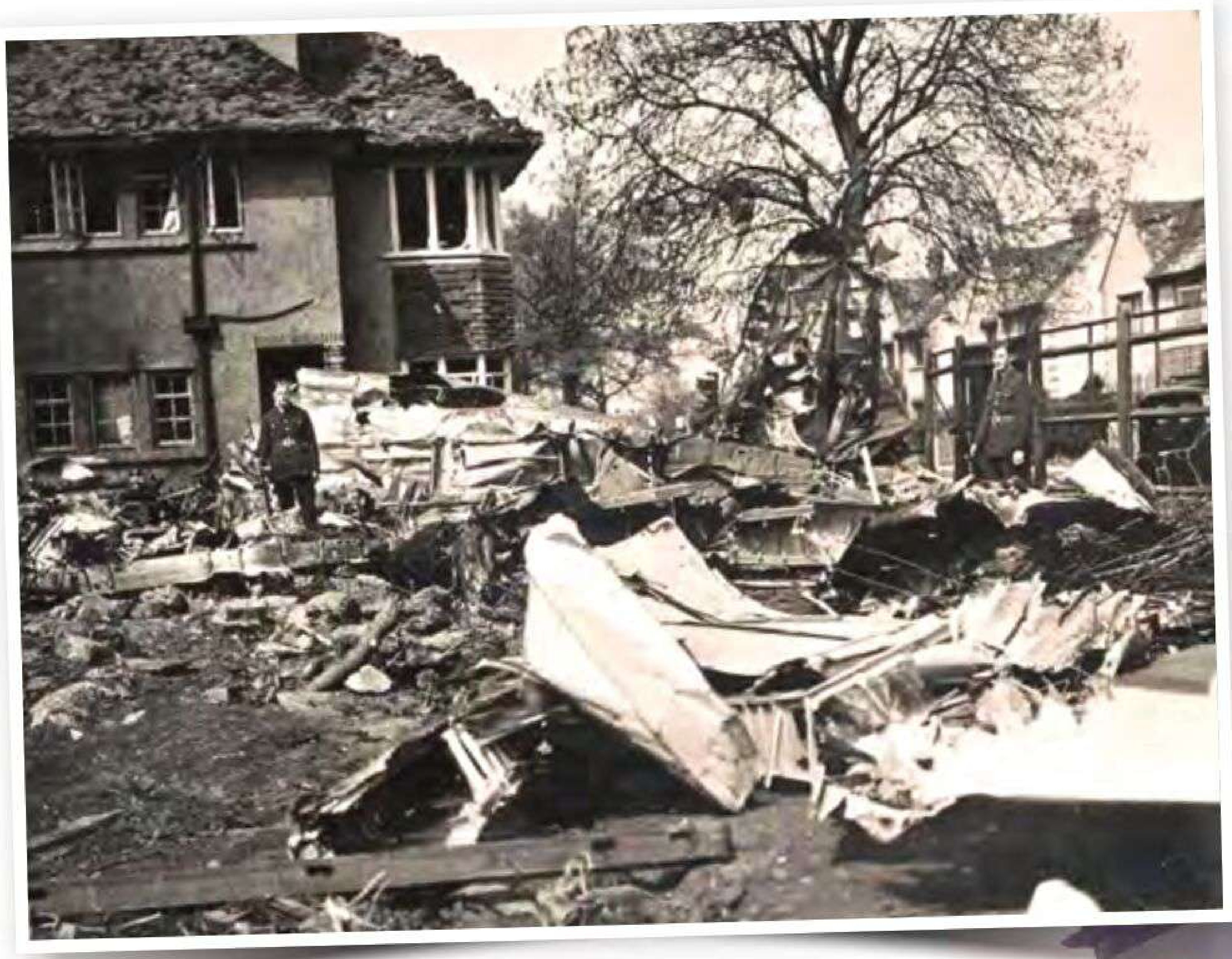
Some 24 Norwegian towns and cities were heavily bombed during Operation *Weserübung*. This is a view of Kristiansund that was taken after the fighting in July 1940. (National Archives of Norway)

British troops embarked on a warship at Dunfermline, bound for Norway, on April 22, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

FIRST CIVILIAN CASUALTIES ON MAINLAND UK

Even before the start of World War Two, Britain had been preparing for destruction to rain down from the skies. The country's great fear was of an aerial bombardment that would devastate its cities and slaughter its people. As it turned out, the first months of the war came and went relatively peacefully.

The first civilian death due to aerial activity was Doris Bridge was badly injured at 45 Foresters Drive, Wallington, Surrey, after a Bristol Blenheim, L6724, crashed soon after take-off from RAF Croydon on February 24, 1940. Badly injured, she died soon after in hospital. Her 5-year-old daughter, Jill Bridge, suffered the same fate. The pilot of the Blenheim, 92 Squadron's Pilot Officer Reginald Whitmarsh, who had been undertaking his first night solo flight, was also killed.

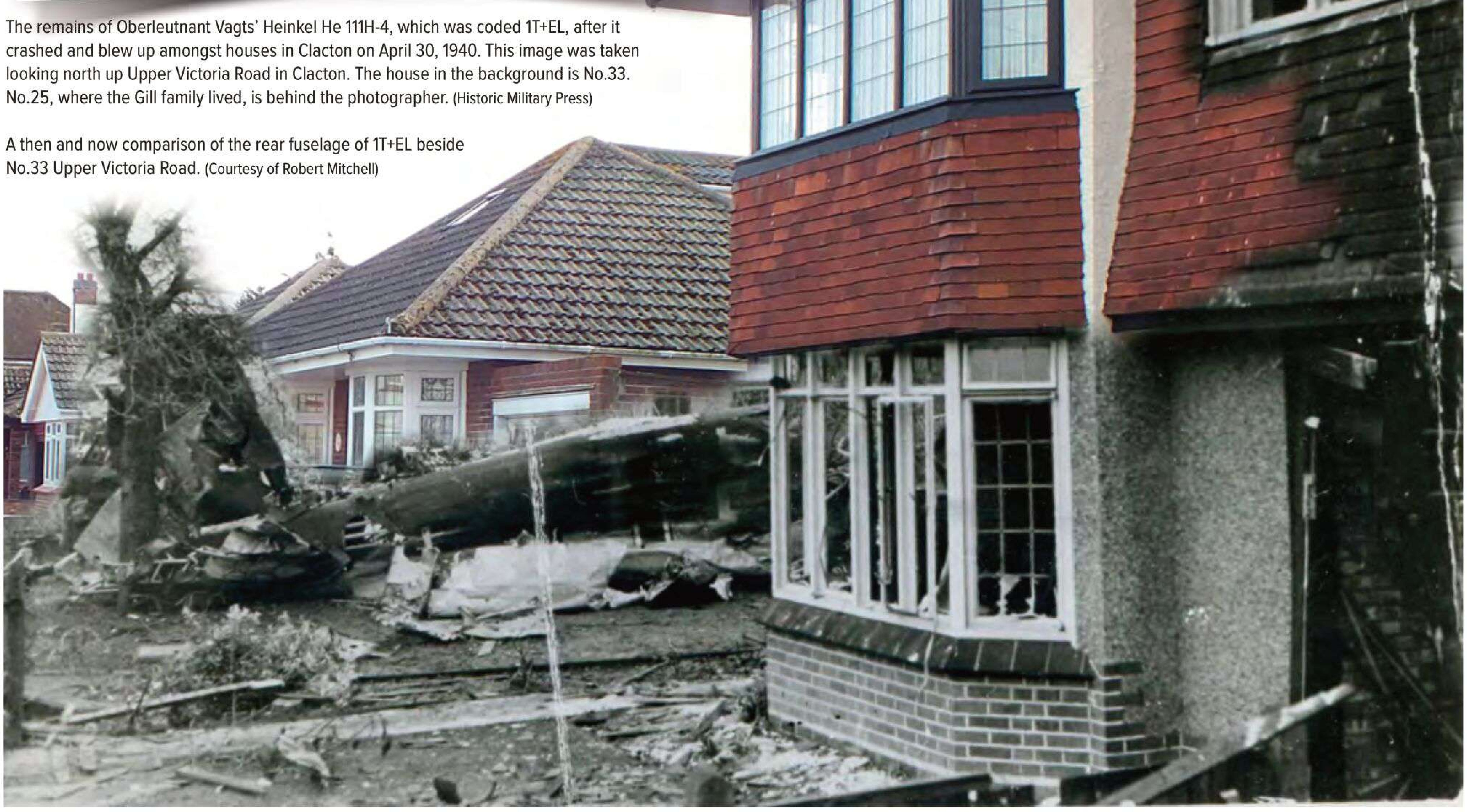


The remains of Oberleutnant Vagts' Heinkel He 111H-4, which was coded 1T+EL, after it crashed and blew up amongst houses in Clacton on April 30, 1940. This image was taken looking north up Upper Victoria Road in Clacton. The house in the background is No.33. No.25, where the Gill family lived, is behind the photographer. (Historic Military Press)

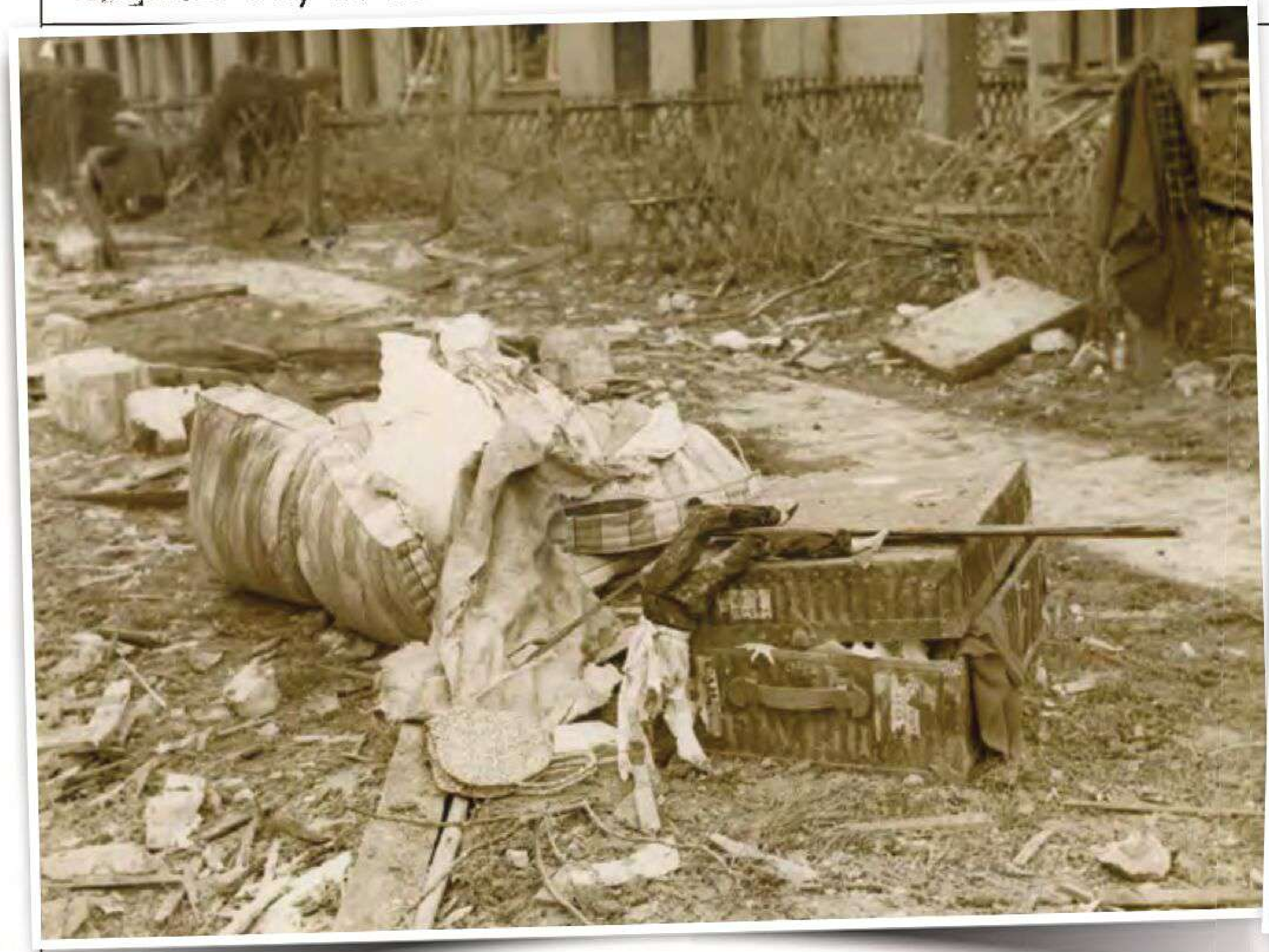
The first death due to enemy action was that of 27-year-old James Isbister on March 16, 1940. Soon after sunset that day, a force of German bombers again attacked the naval base at Scapa Flow. Intercepted by RAF fighters, some of the raiders jettisoned their bombs. One of these fell on a cottage in the small community of Bridge of Waith on Orkney. Isbister, the Luftwaffe's first victim in the British Isles, was killed in the explosion.

Just over a month passed before the British mainland suffered its first casualties at the hands of German bombers. As midnight approached on the evening of April 30, the sound of an aircraft could be heard approaching the Essex coast near Clacton-on-Sea. It was in fact the Heinkel He 111H-4 of 3/KGr126 flown by Oberleutnant Hermann Vagts. The German crew's mission that night had been to undertake mine-laying along the Norfolk and Suffolk coast, but as the bomber approached land it encountered a thick blanket of fog.

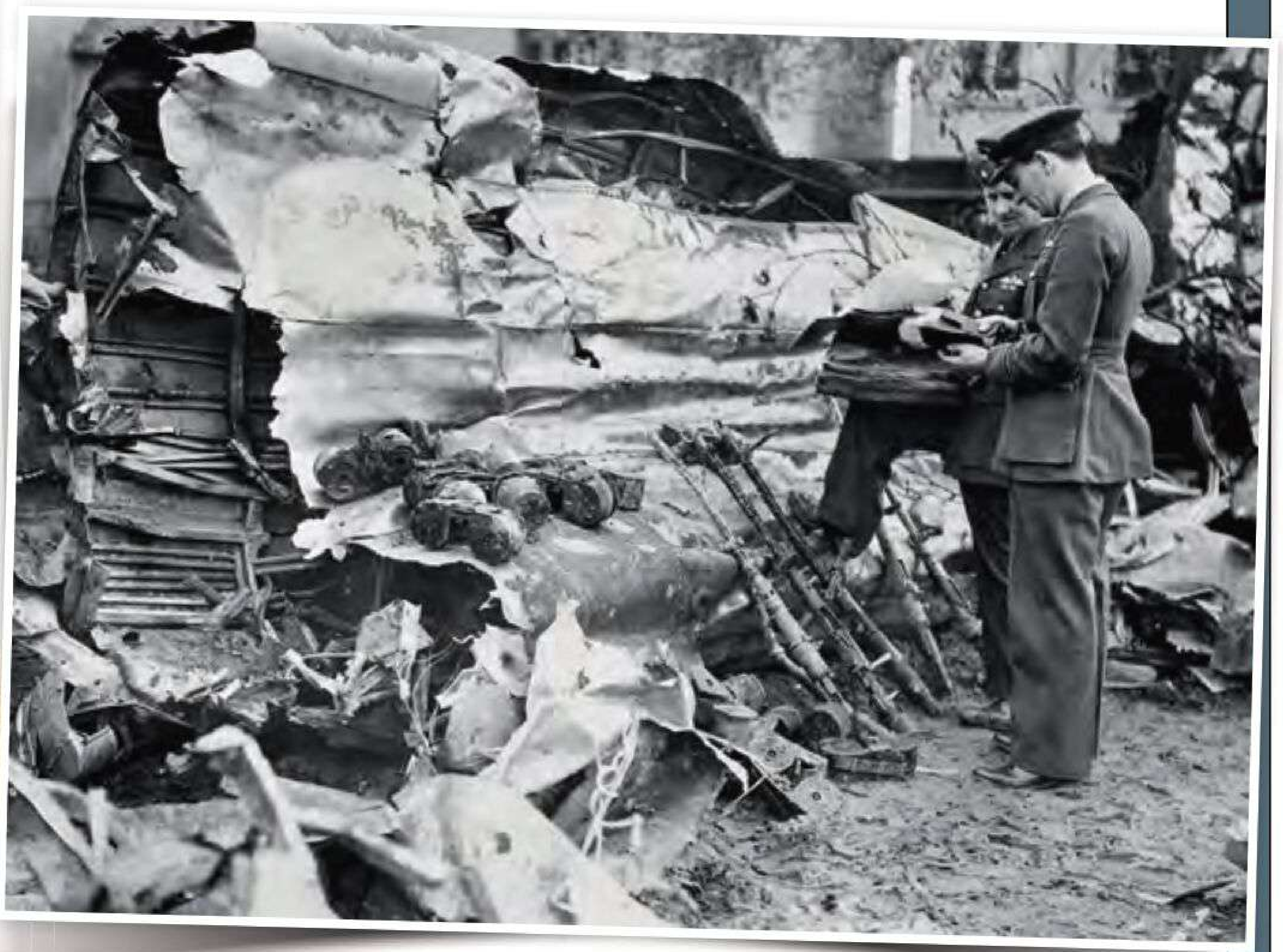
Losing track of their position, Vagts and his crew were soon engaged by anti-aircraft batteries at Felixstowe and Harwich, as well as by gunners on ships offshore. It is stated in some accounts that shells from one or more of the batteries exploded so close to the Heinkel that one of the engines and the rudder were damaged. No longer able to be steered effectively, and with failing power, the aircraft began to fly round in ever-decreasing and erratic circles.



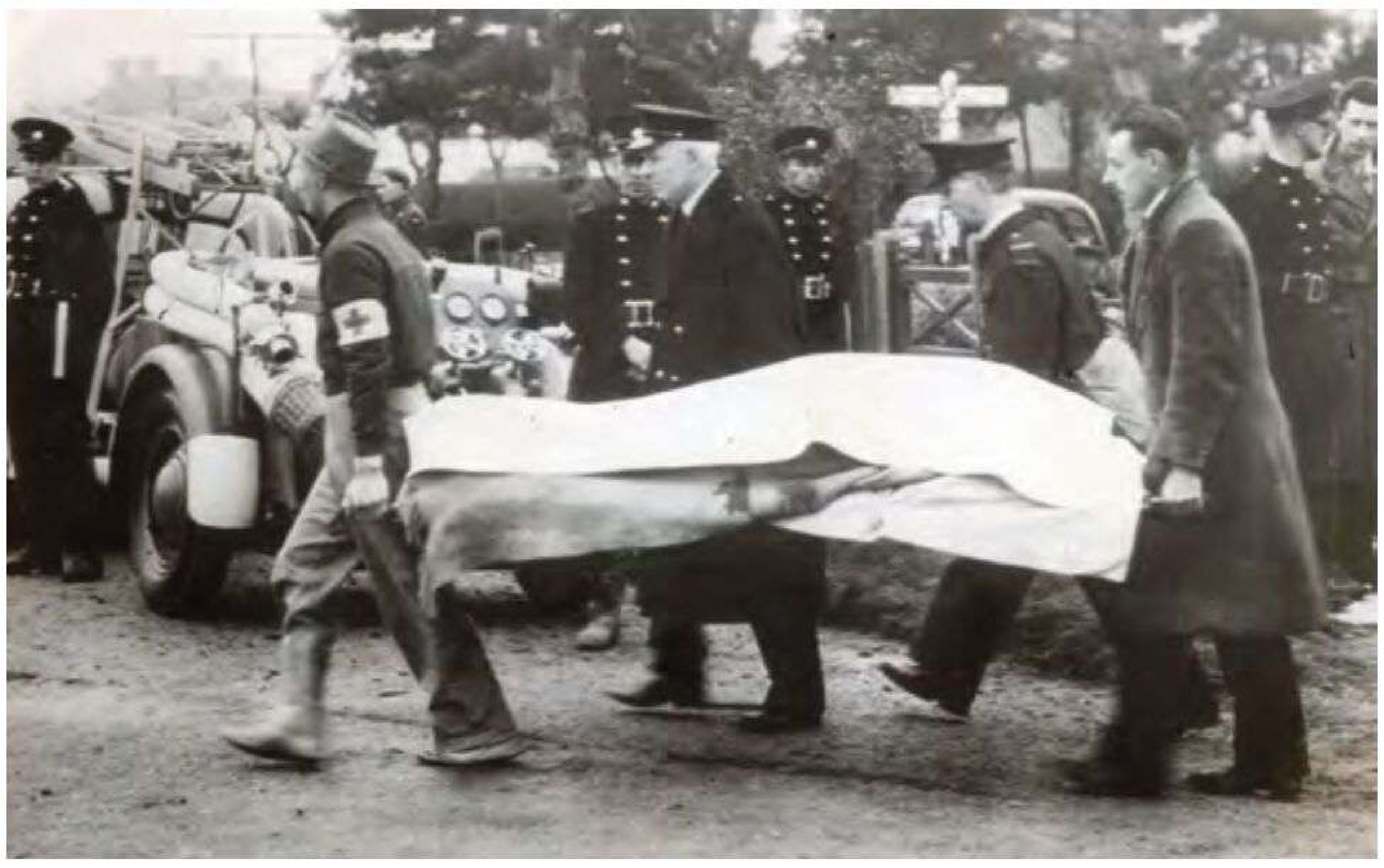
A then and now comparison of the rear fuselage of 1T+EL beside No.33 Upper Victoria Road. (Courtesy of Robert Mitchell)



Personal possessions litter Upper Victoria Road after the explosion of one of the mines being carried by the Heinkel. (Historic Military Press)



RAF personnel examine parts of the wreckage of Oberleutnant Vagts' after the crash late on April 30, 1940. (Historic Military Press)



The body of one of the Heinkel's crew is removed from the crash site on May 1, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

As the Heinkel neared the ground it circled round Clacton-on-Sea twice before flying out towards Holland-on-Sea. Flames could reportedly be seen flickering round one of its engines and the fuselage. Residents in Clacton then saw the Heinkel circle back, dropping down towards the ground.

One fireman on duty at Clacton, Jeff Jefferies, described hearing the bomber in trouble: "At the station we heard the sound of this low-flying aircraft and by the strange noises she was making we reckoned something was drastically wrong with her. She came over-head, circled the town twice, went out to sea then turned towards Holland-on-Sea and came down low over the recreation ground as though trying to land."

With each second that passed, the Heinkel lost height. Then, just before midnight, as the German bomber came in from the sea once more, eyewitnesses reported seeing flares fired by the Luftwaffe crew. At this point the aircraft's engines suddenly, ominously, fell silent.

One resident of Victoria Road, a Mrs E F Thomas, had not long returned from the cinema when disaster struck. "We heard an airplane very low and getting nearer," she informed a local reporter, "and we looked out of the bedroom window. Suddenly the airplane appeared and one wing caught the chimney pot of a neighbouring house. The chimney pot came down and the wing came off and is lying in the garden."

Having clipped the top of several houses in Victoria Road and then struck a lamp post, the stricken Heinkel slammed into an area of open ground to the west of Upper Victoria Road. So low had the aircraft been prior to impact that its propellers scored the tarmac in the road. After the sounds of the screaming engines and the smashing and tearing of metal, there was a brief period of stunned silence. Flames immediately started licking at the wreckage.

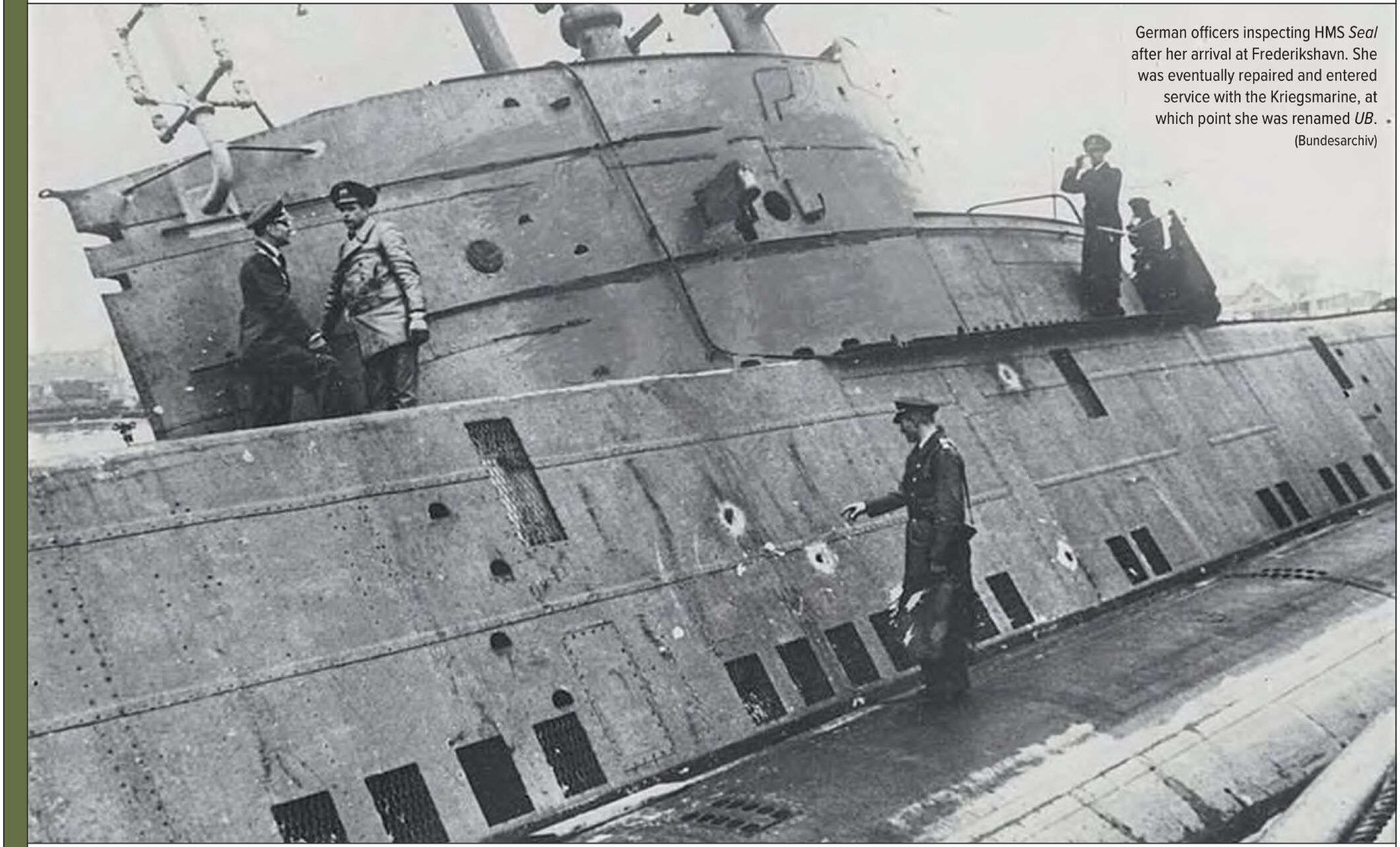
The next instance the strange stillness in the night air suddenly erupted into a cacophony of violence as the whole area was devastated by a huge explosion; both the aircraft and one of the 1,000kg Luftmine B parachute mines it had been carrying detonated with a deafening blast.

Having heard the Heinkel crash, one of Clacton's Air Raid Wardens, Mr A Knight, had come out from his nearby home to investigate. "I ran out in my dressing gown and saw the airplane and the house burning. As I got within thirty yards the whole thing went up. Luckily I flung myself on the ground just in time. I hurt my knee and got hit by a certain amount of flying debris, but no serious damage was done. My ear drums were so affected that I could not hear from some hours afterwards. The airplane had shorn away the corner of one house and I could see an empty bed hanging down." As he stood up, it was then that Knight noticed that the dressing gown he was wearing had been torn to shreds by the blast.

In Victoria Road, trees had been split by the force of the explosion and bushes scorched. The houses close to where the Heinkel had come to a standstill were demolished. No.25, the home of Frederick and Dorothy Gill and their 19-year-old son William, was the building nearest to the bomber; it had virtually disintegrated. Despite the scale of the explosion and devastation it wrought, Frederick and Dorothy were the only fatalities. They were the first civilian deaths of the war in mainland Britain to have resulted from enemy action – albeit in the form of a terrible accident.

People who had been watching the drama unfold from their houses were savagely slashed by flying glass as windows were blown in when the mine exploded. As a result, a total of 156 people injured that night, thirty-four of whom were described as "serious" and required hospitalisation.

This memorial seat commemorating the death of Frederick and Dorothy Gill can be seen at the south end of Upper Victoria Road at the junction with Albert and Skelmersdale roads. The bungalows in the background, directly above the plaque on the bench, occupy what had been the open space on which Heinkel 1T+EL came to rest. (Historic Military Press)



German officers inspecting HMS *Seal* after her arrival at Frederikshavn. She was eventually repaired and entered service with the Kriegsmarine, at which point she was renamed *UB*. (Bundesarchiv)

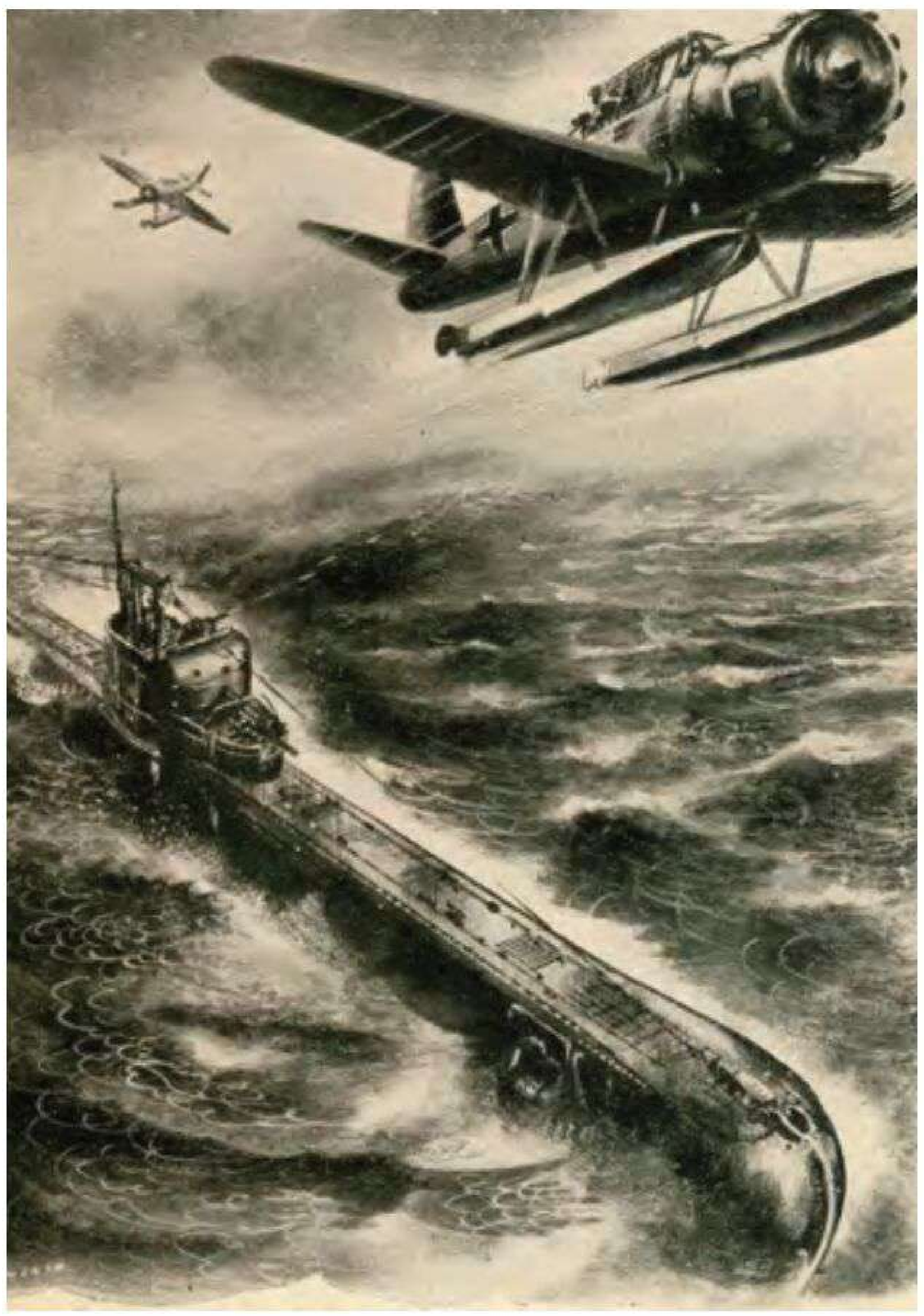
SUBMARINE HMS SEAL CAPTURED

Unlike the RAF, which had only begun its contribution to the mining of Germany's coastal waters on April 13, 1940, the Royal Navy had been fulfilling this role since the very start of the war. As part of this effort, the Grampus-class mine-laying submarine HMS *Seal*, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Rupert Lonsdale, sailed from Immingham on her eleventh war patrol on April 29, 1940. She had been assigned to Operation *DF 7*, a mine-laying mission in the Kattegat.

Early on May 4, *Seal* reached the area where she was to lay her cargo of 50 mines. Despite being attacked by an enemy aircraft, the task was duly completed. It was at that moment as *Seal* was leaving the Kattegat, that she struck a mine herself. The following account of what followed was published in *The War Illustrated* in May 1946:

"The mine exploded and *Seal*, 20 per cent flooded, hit the bottom of the sea-bed and lay there with her bows up, at an angle of 18 degrees. Strenuous but futile efforts were at once made to close a watertight door through which water was cascading in. Oil and water were pumped out of the tanks, to lighten the submarine. All this the Lieut.-Commander said, made continuous and ever increased demands on the physical and mental capacities of the crew. The men were dizzy and panting for breath.

"There occurred then a never-to-be-forgotten scene. The Commander summoned all hands, and together, as the *Seal* lay crippled and helpless on the sea-bed, officers and 60 men repeated the Lord's Prayer. Eventually the motors started again and the submarine surfaced, after having been submerged for 22 hours. Code books and other secret documents were placed in weighted bags and thrown overboard and periscope and Asdic detecting gear was smashed. Four at a time the crew went to the conning tower for air, but some of their number were in a comatose condition, unable to move.



A German propaganda drawing of HMS *Seal* under attack by two Arado seaplanes on May 5, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

"Helpless as she lay on the surface, the *Seal* came in for further attack by German aircraft. Now the engines failed altogether to respond, and when the main motors were switched on, they blew up. It was impossible for any of the crew to go on deck; those who attempted it were subjected to streams of machine-gun bullets. The odds were too tremendous to continue, and the commander hoisted a white sheet from the bridge – but not until the first Arado seaplane had been joined by two others and Lieut.-Commander Lonsdale himself fired at them with Lewis guns, until the guns jammed…

"One of the seaplanes came down close to the *Seal*, and the Commander was ordered to leave the submarine and swim over to the aircraft. Finally, all the crew were taken aboard a German trawler and the *Seal* taken in tow, reaching Denmark only just afloat."

With all of the crew taken prisoner, except for one casualty, HMS *Seal* was the only Royal Navy vessel to be surrendered and captured in World War Two.

BLITZKRIEG IN THE WEST

Reichs-
Grenze
WH

Enemy forces crossing the border into Luxembourg as part of *Fall Gelb*, the codename for the German invasion of the Low Countries, on May 10, 1940. The attack on this small nation began at 04.35 hours that morning; facing only light resistance, Luxembourg was occupied within a single day. Its government escaped to London, where a government-in-exile was formed.

On the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler's forces launched their long-anticipated invasion of Belgium, and a message was issued from the French Army's headquarters to implement 'Plan D'. These instructions reached General Lord Gort at approximately 06.15 hours, and he duly instructed his corps commanders to begin their move forward into Belgium at 13.00 hours.

Though the men of the British Expeditionary Force had spent the months since their arrival on the Franco-Belgian border constructing more than 40 miles of field fortifications, as soon as word was received that the Germans had invaded Belgium, those positions were abandoned and the troops were moved up to a new position on the River Dyle – this was 'Plan D'. If this line could be held, it would mean that a large part of Belgium would be saved from invasion and its main industrial areas would be preserved.

"It was hard to believe," Lieutenant General Alan Brooke, in command of II Corps, noted that "on a most glorious spring day with all nature looking quite at its best… we were taking the first step towards what must become one of the greatest battles of history!'

At 14.05 hours, Général Gamelin, the French Army's Commander-in-Chief, issued a special 'Order of the Day': "The attack which we have been anticipating since last October has been launched this morning. It is the beginning of a fight to the death between Germany and ourselves. The watchword for all the Allies is: calm, energy, confidence."

As the Blitzkrieg rolls relentlessly westwards, German troops are pictured advancing through dusty French roads in May or June 1940. (Historic Military Press)

From the BEF's perspective, it was the men of the 12th Royal Lancers, with their Morris CS9 light armoured cars, who represented the first British regiment to cross into Belgium, leading the way to the Dyle through cheering crowds. It reached the Dyle, unopposed, at 22.30 hours. Everything appeared to be going according to plan, with the French armies on the right and left of the BEF reported as advancing on time. Already, though, the BEF's headquarters at Arras had come under heavy bombardment with the Luftwaffe targeting the airfields, railways and supply bases of the Expeditionary Force.

German soldiers cross the Belgian-French border during the Blitzkrieg. (Danish National Archives)

On the 11th, the remaining bulk of the BEF reached the Dyle as planned, despite encountering the first of the refugees abandoning their homes ahead of the advancing Germans. The first skirmishes took place along the British sector on the 13th, though there was no engagement of any consequence. But some 70 miles to the south of the forward British and French positions there were reports of German forces having marched through the Ardennes and crossed the Belgian stretch of the River Meuse. At this early stage in the unfolding battle the true consequences of this approach by the Germans were not fully appreciated.

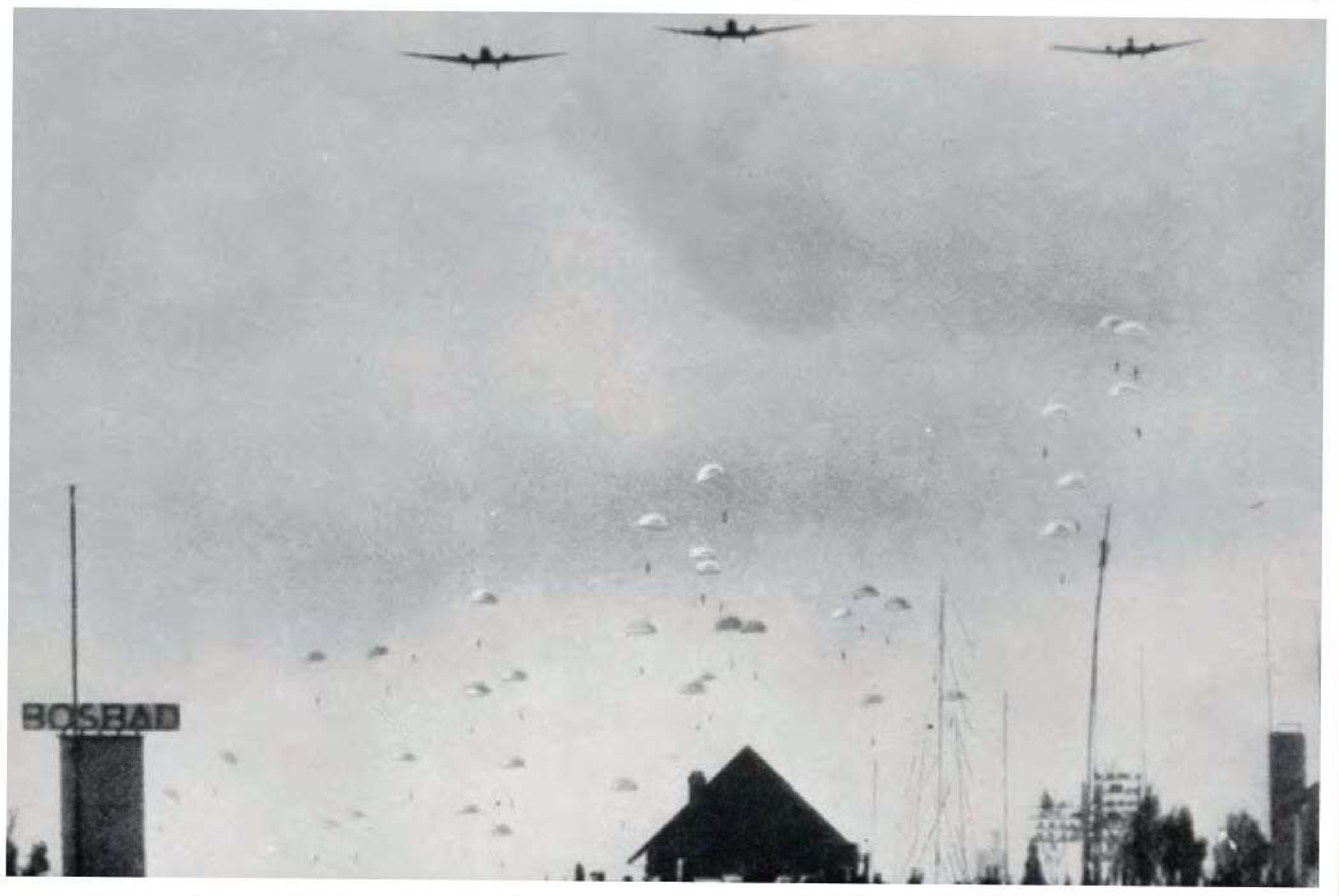
The French high command considered the densely-wooded and hilly terrain of the Ardennes to be effectively impenetrable to a modern army with all its motorised encumbrances and that the line of the River Meuse easily defendable against light forces. This misconception meant that the border along the Ardennes had received comparatively little attention from the French military planners and only a small number of pillboxes and bunkers had been built. To Général Gamelin it simply did not seem worth tying up men and materiel where the Germans could never attack. Gamelin was, it soon transpired, completely, and catastrophically, wrong.

It was Generalmajor Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division, part of Generalleutnant Heinz Guderian's XIX Corps, that led the way over the Meuse near Dinant, Belgium, on May 13. It was supported by the Luftwaffe which carried out the heaviest bombardment of the war to that date and, it is claimed, the most intense the Germans mounted at any stage in the war.

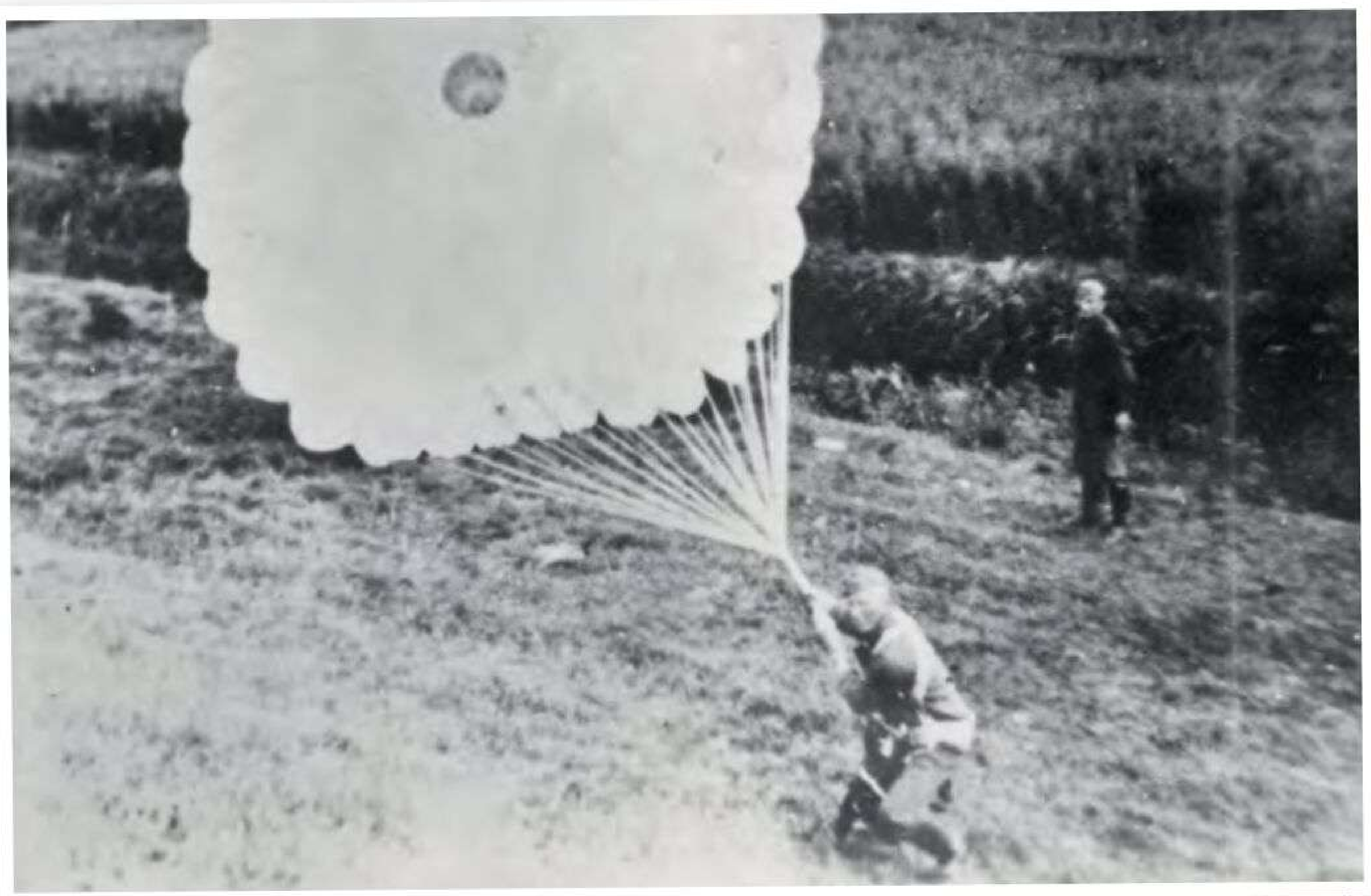
With the BEF and the French First Army holding off the German attacks and the French Second and Third armies manning the Maginot Line and associated areas, now that the panzers were across the Meuse there was little to stop them racing unimpeded across northern France. At a single stroke, all of France's defensive plans were thrown into chaos. Just days after the start of the fighting, it appeared that Hitler was on the verge of an astonishing victory.

Pictured by a German soldier during the Blitzkrieg in 1940, a group of French soldiers wait under guard by a roadside following their capture. (Historic Military Press)

German soldiers inspect a pile of French files and helmets captured during the Battle of France in 1940. (Historic Military Press)



Having jumped from a trio of Junkers Ju 52s, German Fallschirmjäger, parachute troops, land to the east of The Hague in the Netherlands early on the morning of May 10, 1940. This scene was photographed from the home of H. Lamme, the then chairman of the Dutch Association of Photojournalists, who lived at Helenastraat 2 in The Hague. (Dutch National Archives)



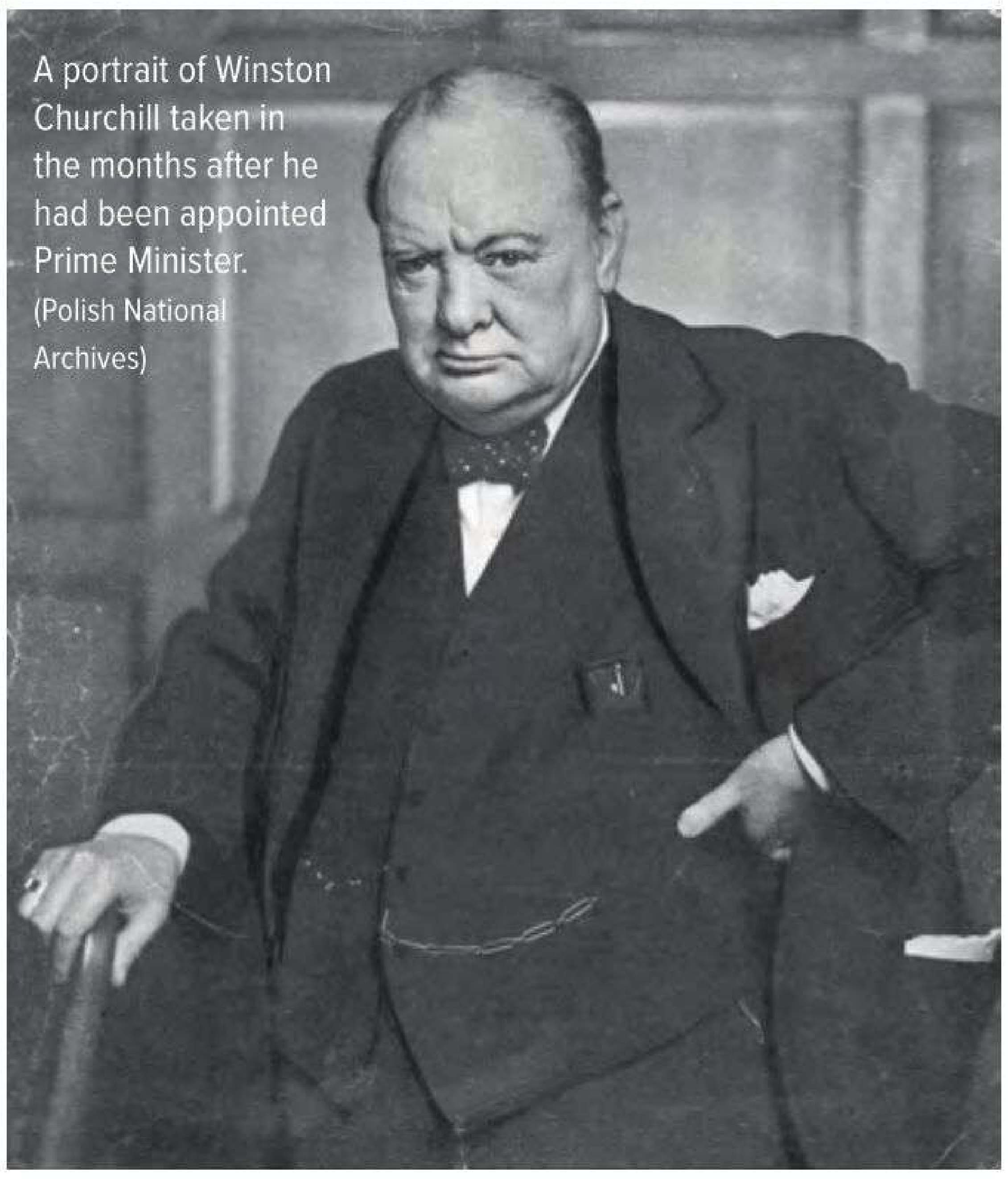
A German paratrooper gathers in his parachute having landed in the Netherlands on May 10, 1940. (Dutch National Archives)

The following day, May 14, brought more distressing news for the Allies with the announcement that The Netherlands had been overrun and its government had surrendered. Though this had no immediate effect on the BEF, which continued to only be lightly engaged, the news came as a terrible shock to the Belgians, eroding their already shaky morale. Despite this situation, Belgium did not seek an armistice until May 27.

Meanwhile, on May 15, just five days after the start of the German onslaught, the newly-appointed French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, rang his equally recently-installed counterpart in London, Winston Churchill, to announce that: "We have been defeated. We are beaten; we have lost the battle… The front is broken near Sedan: they [the Germans] are pouring through in great numbers with tanks and armoured cars."

On the same day that Reynaud spoke with Churchill, Alan Brooke observed that the Belgians were "in a very shaky and jumpy condition" and with the fall of Holland, the Germans would be able to bring an increased number of troops against them. "The BEF is therefore likely to have both its flanks turned," he wrote in his diary entry of May 15, "and will have a very unpleasant time in extricating itself out of its current position". At this stage, much as in 1914, when the BEF of World War One was compelled to withdraw from Mons in line with a French withdrawal, so the BEF of this new conflict had to conform to the movements of the French First Army to maintain the integrity of the Allied front.

Within just a few days of Gamelin's defiant 'Order of the Day', all confidence had evaporated from the French Army's leaders and panic had quickly replaced calm. France was about to suffer its greatest defeat and the BEF now faced the prospect of disaster on an unimaginable scale.



A portrait of Winston Churchill taken in the months after he had been appointed Prime Minister. (Polish National Archives)

Even before Hitler had unleashed his Blitzkrieg in the West, Chamberlain had come to the conclusion that he had to stand down. In fact, he had reached an agreement with the Labour Party on May 9 that he would resign in favour of Churchill, one of the very few politicians untainted with the smear of appeasement. But in light of the German attack, Chamberlain was concerned that a change of government at such a time might be highly dangerous. However, Atlee, the Labour leader, was insistent – he would not serve under Chamberlain.

At 21.00 hours on the evening of May 10, Chamberlain spoke to the nation on the BBC: "Early this morning, without room or excuse, Hitler added another to the horrible crimes which already disgrace his name by a sudden attack on Holland, Luxemburg and Belgium… I am not now going to make any comment upon the debates in the House of Commons which took place on Tuesday and Wednesday last. But when it was over, I had no doubt in my mind, that some new and drastic action must be taken if confidence was to be restored in the House of Commons, and the war carried on with the vigour and energy which are essential to victory.

"What was that action to be? It was clear, that at this critical moment in the war, what was needed was the formation of a government which included members of the Labour and Liberal oppositions, and thus present a united front to the enemy… By the afternoon of today, it was apparent that the essential unity could be secured under another Prime Minister, though not under myself.

"In those circumstances my duty was plain. I sought an audience of the King this evening and tended to him my resignation… The King has now entrusted to my friend and colleague, Mr Winston Churchill, the task of forming a new administration on a national basis."

Characteristically, Churchill set about that task with relish. Agreement between himself and the other Party leaders was quickly achieved. He wisely asked Chamberlain to continue as Leader of the Conservative Party as well as offering him Leadership of the House of Commons as well as the Lord Presidency, both of which were accepted. Churchill was far from popular in the Commons and the Conservatives had a very healthy majority. Keeping Chamberlain onboard ensured that the new Coalition Cabinet would have sufficient support from MPs to pass any legislation that might be required.

Churchill also wanted to keep the War Cabinet, which would oversee the direction of the war, as small as possible, comprising just six members. He duly created for himself the new post of Minister of Defence, with "undefined" powers, being careful, in his own words, "not to define my rights and duties", but in which he ascribed to himself the supervision of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Churchill was now in charge of the war effort with almost unlimited authority.

CHURCHILL BECOMES PRIME MINISTER

Winston Churchill set about his role as Minister of Defence with relish. He is pictured here during a tour of anti-invasion defences in the north-west of England in August 1940. (Danish National Archives)

OCCUPATION OF ICELAND

On the very day that Hitler's forces were unleashing their Blitzkrieg in the west, the British were also carrying out their own invasion by landing on neutral Iceland.

In a meeting of the War Cabinet on May 6, Churchill, concerned that Iceland, which had refused to join the Allies, might fall under German influence or, worse still, be Hitler's next target for occupation, proposed that British forces should pre-empt any such moves. With the policy agreed upon, the plans for what was codenamed Operation *Fork* were hastily finalised.

The occupation force, known as Sturges Force after its commanding officer, the World War One and Gallipoli veteran Colonel Robert Sturges, was formed around the men of the 2nd Royal Marine Battalion. All 749 men of Sturges Force duly embarked on the cruisers HMS *Berwick* and HMS *Glasgow* at Greenock. Both ships, as well as their destroyer escorts, sailed for Iceland at 04.00 hours on May 8.

Universal carriers are paraded for the camera as the British and Canadian garrison settles in on Iceland following Operation *Fork*. (National Museum of Denmark)

Many of the Marines had never been to sea before and the journey north was, recalled Petty Officer Stan Foreman on HMS *Berwick*, an extremely unpleasant one: "Very rough seas were encountered on passage to Iceland and the majority of the marines cluttered gangways and mess-decks throughout the ship, prostrate with seasickness." The invasion flotilla anchored off Iceland in the early hours of May 10. The local population, having being alerted to its presence by HMS *Berwick*'s seaplane, began congregating on the quayside at Reykjavík.

"When the invading force arrived in Reykjavík in the early hours of the morning," wrote the historian David Gunnlaugsson, "they were met by a policeman on a bicycle. What followed turned out to be a quintessentially British – and simultaneously Icelandic – affair… Some locals had started gathering at the harbour. Among them was the British consul who asked a policeman whether he would mind asking people to stand back so that the soldiers could disembark from the destroyer [HMS *Fearless*]. The policeman replied 'certainly' and explained to the small crowd that they were in the way of the invading army."

Once ashore, the Marines set about establishing control of parts of Iceland's infrastructure, including the Post Office, state broadcaster and the meteorological office. They also captured the German consul Werner Gerlach, who was found in the process of destroying his records. That evening, Iceland's government issued a formal protest, declaring that their neutrality had been "flagrantly violated" and "its independence infringed".

The British, though, were there to stay. To assist with garrisoning the island, on May 18, Lord Caldecote, the Secretary of State for the Dominions, wrote to the Canadian government suggesting "that Canada should garrison Iceland with troops other than those required for her field force". So it was that, in the weeks which followed, Canadian forces and other British units, including those from the RAF, also began arriving, bolstering an occupation that many supported, citing the subsequent economic revival and infrastructure investment, whilst others decried, pointing at the loss of sovereignty and social upheaval.

British personnel ashore at Reykjavík signalling to warships anchored off the Icelandic coast. (National Museum of Denmark)

"BLOOD, TOIL, TEARS AND SWEAT"

An improvised roadblock is erected by British troops circa May 27, 1940. The original caption states: "With armed guards on duty, British soldiers erect barricades to close roads in Southern England as Britain took elaborate precautions to thwart possible attempted invasion by air." (Historic Military Press)

It was on May 13, 1940, that the House of Commons sat for the first time since Churchill became Prime Minister; four days had passed since the end of the Norway debate that finally precipitated his predecessor's departure on May 10. Whilst Churchill told MPs that he would only give a short summary of events, it would prove to be one of the most memorable and most frequently quoted (often inaccurately) speeches ever delivered in Parliament.

"To form an Administration of this scale and complexity is a serious undertaking in itself," Churchill declared to his fellow politicians in his first speech as Prime Minister, "but it must be remembered that we are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history, that we are in action at many other points in Norway and in Holland, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean, that the air battle is continuous and that many preparations… have to be made here at home. In this crisis I hope I may be pardoned if I do not address the House at any length today. I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act."

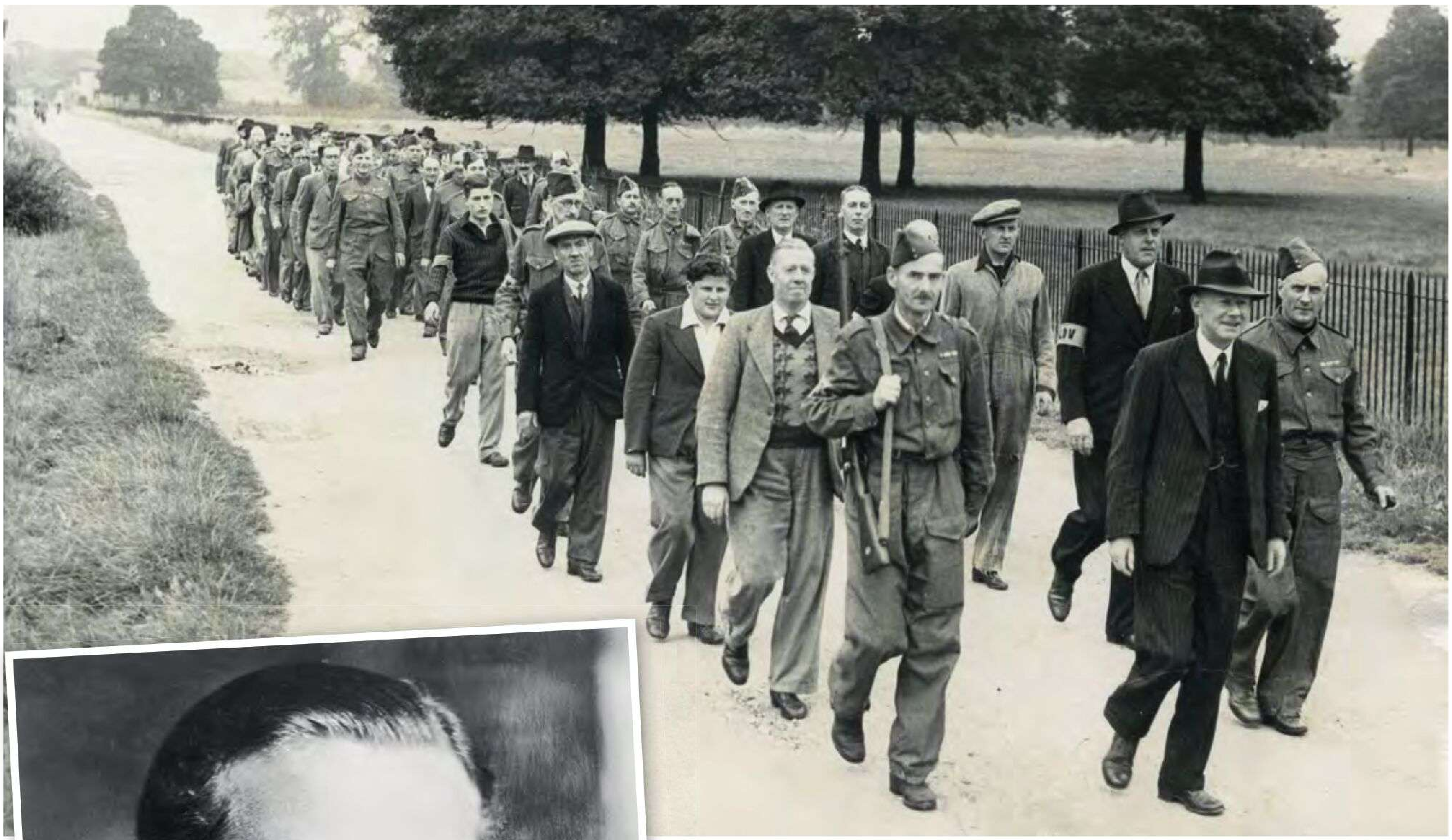
It was the following sentence spoken by Churchill which captured the spirit of the struggle to come: "I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'."

A master orator, the new Prime Minister paused to allow the gravity of his words to sink in. He was, despite his words, able to offer the House something – hope: "We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.

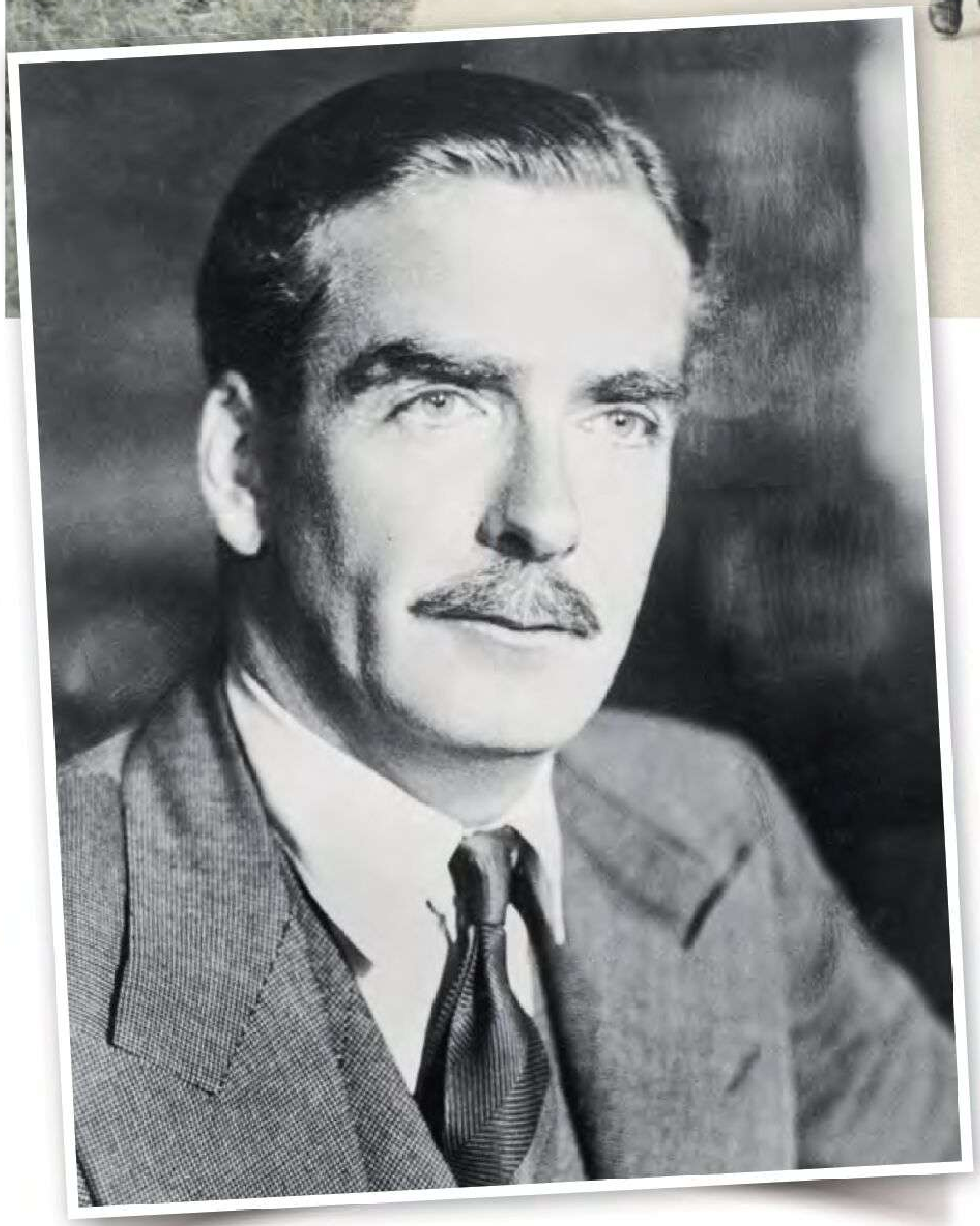
"You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, 'Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength'."

Prime Minister Winston Churchill looks out over the Channel during an inspection tour in 1940. (Danish National Archives)

FORMATION OF THE LDV



A unit of the Local Defence Volunteers on parade soon after their formation in the summer of 1940. Note the mix of civilian and military clothing, as well as the medal ribbons worn by some of the men. (Historic Military Press)



A portrait of Antony Eden, whose broadcast on the evening of May 14, 1940 generated a remarkable response throughout Britain. (Library of Congress)

As Churchill had declared in his speech on May 13, 1940, preparations for the nation's defence had become a very real priority for the government. As part of the steps being discussed, there were discussions around the formation of a national volunteer army. It was perhaps unsurprising that such a step was being considered, for Britain had a long history of its citizens taking up arms for the country's defence. Indeed, the new Prime Minister had already visited the matter as early as October 8, 1939, on which date he had written to the Lord Privy Seal, Samuel Hoare, proposing the creation of a 'Home Guard' force of some 500,000 men.

The invasion of France and the Low Countries, during which the Germans deployed *fallschirmjäger* (paratroopers) with devastating effect, focused attention on the subject. With the decision made, shortly after nine o'clock on the evening of May 14, the words of the newly-appointed Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, were broadcast by the BBC to an expectant population.

"I want to speak to you to-night," Eden began, "about the form of warfare which the Germans have been employing so extensively against Holland and Belgium – namely, the dropping of troops by parachute behind the main defensive lines… Their function is to seize important points, such as aerodromes, power stations, villages, railway junctions and telephone exchanges, either for the purpose of destroying them at once, or of holding them until the arrival of reinforcements. The purpose of the parachute attack is to disorganise and confuse, as a preparation for the landing of troops by aircraft.

"The success of such an attack depends on speed. Consequently, the measures to defeat such an attack must be prompt and rapid. It is upon this basis that… we are going to ask you to help us, in a manner which I know will be welcome to thousands of you. Since the war began the Government have received countless enquiries from all over the Kingdom from men of all ages who are for one reason or another not at present engaged in military service, and who wish to do something for the defence of the country.

"Now is your opportunity. We want large numbers of such men in Great Britain who are British subjects, between the ages of 17 and 65, to come forward now and offer their service in order to make assurance doubly sure. The name of the new force which is now to be raised will be the 'Local Defence Volunteers'. This name, Local Defence Volunteers, describes its duties in three words."

The response to Eden's appeal was impressive. In many cases, he had not finished speaking before Police stations, where the volunteers were to enlist and provide their details, found themselves swamped. Such was the eagerness of so many that by the end of June 1940 a total of 1,456,000 men had registered as volunteers in the LDV. "My expectations," remarked a rueful Anthony Eden in August that year, "have been far exceeded".

With the situation in France deteriorating at a rapid pace, at 16.30 hours on May 19 the War Cabinet was informed that Lord Gort, the BEF's commander, was "examining a possible withdrawal towards Dunkirk if that were forced upon him". Though initially sceptical that such a move was necessary, Britain's military and political leaders soon had to face the fact that Hitler's Blitzkrieg was seemingly unstoppable.

As a result, later the same day Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay, Flag Officer Commanding Dover, was summoned to the War Office in London for a meeting chaired by General Riddell-Webster, Quartermaster-General to the Forces. The subject to be discussed was "the hazardous evacuation of very large forces" through Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne. Ramsay was present because he was to be the individual responsible for directing the evacuation.

It was envisaged that, starting on the 20th, the "useless mouths", or, in other words, the non-combatants, would be shipped back to the UK at the rate of 2,000 per day. Then, from the 22nd, base personnel would be evacuated – some 15,000 in total. This would free the roads and the shipping for the vital third stage of the operation, the rescue of the BEF's fighting divisions. Just how many men would eventually be saved was impossible to tell, but even at this stage, the evacuation of tens of thousands of troops was seen as "formidable" and was likely to be, as described by the Quartermaster-General's Department, "on a scale unprecedented in the history of war".

Ramsay returned to Dover early on May 20, and immediately set about dealing with the task that he had been handed. He established his planning staff in a large room normally used for meetings and conferences in connection with the running of the naval base. In World War One, it had held an auxiliary electrical plant and was known as the 'Dynamo Room' – and so Operation *Dynamo* was born. This was confirmed at 19.44 hours on the 22nd when the Admiralty issued a blunt message to its various commands: "The operation for which these ships are being prepared will be known as *Dynamo*."

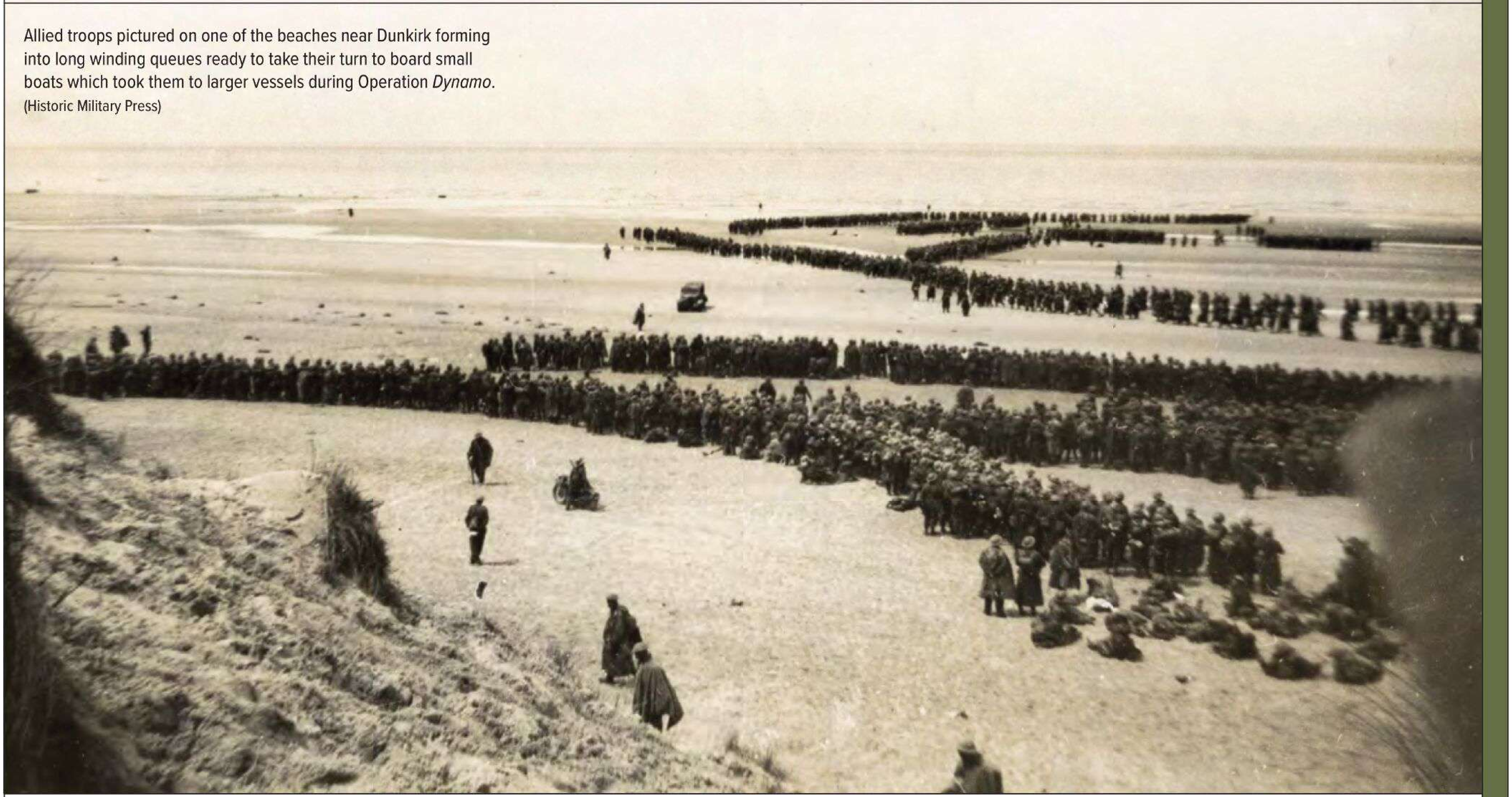
N 16
DUNKERQUE
A street sign on the old D16 running into Dunkirk during or just after Operation *Dynamo*. Note the destroyed vehicle in the background. (Historic Military Press)

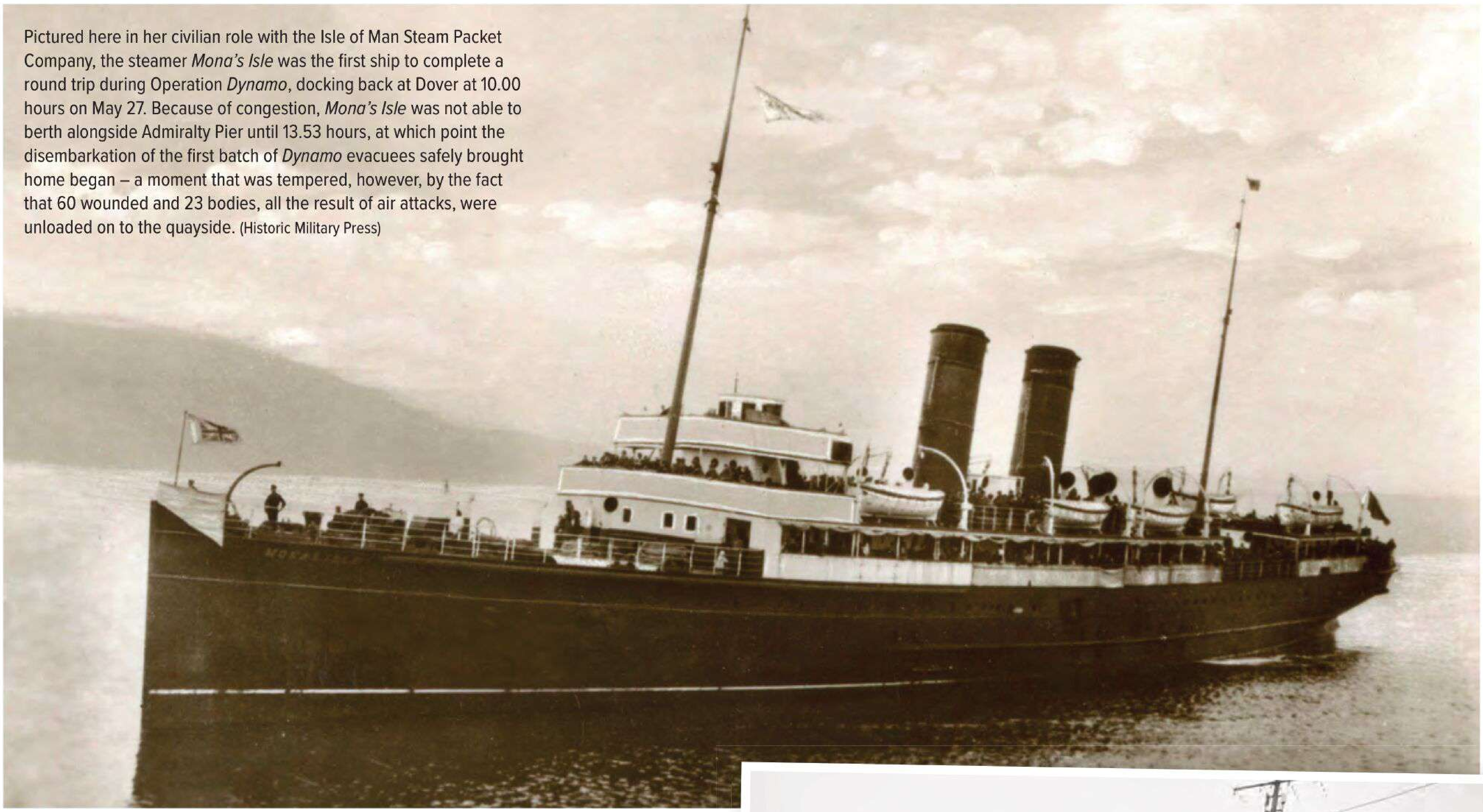
German troops advancing towards Dunkirk pass abandoned vehicles. (Historic Military Press)

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the Channel, Lieutenant Colonel the Viscount Robert Bridgeman, the BEF's acting Operations Officer, was also hard at work on the Army's preparations. Aware of the pressing need for haste, Bridgeman began to draw up his plans on the premise that the evacuation could take place anywhere between Calais and Ostend, that the stretch of coast selected had to be easily reached by the retreating troops, and that it must be capable of being defended by the three corps of the BEF.

After pouring over maps of the French and Belgium coasts, Bridgeman decided that the 27-mile stretch between Ostend and Dunkirk was the most suitable. By the morning of May 22, Bridgeman had covered every detail he could think of. Each corps had been allocated the routes it would use to reach the coast, and which stretch of coast each would hold. If the decision to evacuate was taken, there was now a plan in place.

OPERATION DYNAMO


Allied troops pictured on one of the beaches near Dunkirk forming into long winding queues ready to take their turn to board small boats which took them to larger vessels during Operation *Dynamo*. (Historic Military Press)



Pictured here in her civilian role with the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company, the steamer *Mona's Isle* was the first ship to complete a round trip during Operation *Dynamo*, docking back at Dover at 10.00 hours on May 27. Because of congestion, *Mona's Isle* was not able to berth alongside Admiralty Pier until 13.53 hours, at which point the disembarkation of the first batch of *Dynamo* evacuees safely brought home began – a moment that was tempered, however, by the fact that 60 wounded and 23 bodies, all the result of air attacks, were unloaded on to the quayside. (Historic Military Press)

"THE END CANNOT BE FAR OFF"

It was originally hoped that 10,000 men would be rescued every 24 hours from Calais and Boulogne as well as Dunkirk, with the 30 or so cross-Channel ferries, 12 steam-powered drifters and six coastal cargo ships that had been allocated to the task by the Admiralty. The ships would work the ports in pairs, with no more than two ships at any one time in the three harbours. The speed of the German advance, though, was such that the two more southerly ports had to be disregarded and the evacuation effort therefore concentrated upon Dunkirk and the open sandy beaches which stretched north-east towards Nieuport on the Belgian border.

To many there seemed little hope of more than a fraction of the BEF being saved. Lord Gort was under no illusions that the chances of evacuating all of the troops with the Germans bearing down on them were slim. He told London "that a great part of the BEF and its equipment will inevitably be lost even in the best circumstance". Lieutenant General Alan Brooke, who commanded II Corps, concurred with Gort's pessimistic assessment of the BEF's predicament. "Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now and the end cannot be far off," he had written in his diary on May 23.

The BEF's retreat to Dunkirk was undertaken amid chaotic conditions, with abandoned vehicles and a flood of fleeing civilians blocking the roads. As the perimeter gradually shrunk, some of the men became isolated from their parent units, struggling along in small groups, or joining others who seemed to know where they were going. Many men walked into the perimeter after marching all night on the packed roads. In the darkness, some had lost their officers and had just made their way along with others heading for the coast.

British troops entering Dunkirk pass the smouldering wreckage of a lorry, a small part of the debris of war that came to increasingly litter the streets of the port. (Historic Military Press)

The first warship to sail to Dunkirk as part of *Dynamo* was the destroyer HMS *Wolsey*, pictured here following her return from a subsequent crossing to Dunkirk. On May 26, she was sent over to initially act in a communication role. (Historic Military Press)

With much of their attention focused on the fighting in other parts of France, the Germans also believed that the BEF was trapped and stood little chance of getting away. This was, in large measure, due to the calculations of Generaladmiral Otto Schniewind, who, on May 26, informed the chief of the Luftwaffe, Herman Göring, that, "a regular and orderly transport of large numbers of troops with equipment cannot take place in the hurried and difficult conditions prevailing… Evacuation of troops without equipment, however, is conceivable by means of large numbers of smaller vessels, coastal and ferry steamers, fishing trawlers, drifters, and other small craft, in good weather, even from the open coast. The [Royal] Navy, however, is not in a position to take part successfully in this with the means at its disposal. There are no signs yet of such transport being carried out or prepared."

It was true that on May 26, when Operation *Dynamo* officially commenced at 18.57 hours, the Royal Navy did not have the means to recover tens of thousands of men from the open beaches. Yet, over the course of the following eight days it was not tens, but hundreds of thousands of troops that it lifted from the beaches and the jetties of Dunkirk in the greatest rescue operation in history.

THE WORMHOUDT MASSACRE

Of vital importance to the troops assembling in the evacuation area around Dunkirk following the commencement of *Dynamo* was that the 'pocket' into which the BEF was withdrawing held for as long as possible. This included the main road from the east to Bergues which passed through the towns of Wormhoudt, Cassel and Hazebrouck, these being garrisoned by troops of the 144th Brigade of the 48th (South Midland) Division.

At the key road junction at Wormhoudt were the men of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, the 8th Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment and the 4th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment, along with supporting artillery. A little after midday on May 27, Wormhoudt came under attack for the first time, with German aircraft dropping bombs on the town. But it was not until the following day that the battle for Wormhoudt began in earnest.

At 09.40 hours on the 28th, convoys of German trucks arrived, out of which poured large numbers of infantry. They took up battle positions and opened fire on the Warwicks holding the west and south-west perimeter. German artillery then began shelling Wormhoudt itself. The defenders held their ground staunchly until tanks of the 3rd Panzer Regiment rumbled up, and though the British anti-tank guns crippled four of the panzers, it was an uneven fight. Even so, the defenders held out until all their ammunition had been exhausted, at which point the German troops overran their positions. They dropped their weapons and surrendered to the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (often abbreviated as LSSAH).

A number of the survivors from the Warwickshire and Cheshire regiments, a few from the Royal Artillery, and some French PoWs, amounting to around 80 to 90 men, were rounded up by elements of the LSSAH commanded by Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Mohnke had marched into a barn at the small hamlet of La Plaine au Bois. Amongst those men was Gunner Brian Fahey: "There must have been about 100 men in the barn, and then the Germans surrounded it, and threw in hand grenades. It was apparent that they were going to murder us all. I suppose the men in front took the full force of the blast, but we all went down like a pack of cards."

The interior of the barn at La Plaine au Bois. The reconstruction was unveiled in 2001 by two survivors of the massacre, Alf Tombs and Bert Evans. A similar war crime was committed on May 27, 1940 at Le Paradis, when 97 men, from the 2nd Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment, were executed after their capture by the Waffen-SS. (Historic Military Press)

When the officer commanding the SS troops realised that not all the men had been killed by the grenades, he ordered the survivors outside, where they were shot one by one. Brian Fahey had only been wounded by the grenades; he was taken outside and shot in the back. "When I finally came to, it had all gone quiet in the barn, and I could feel this bubbling in my lung but I realised that I wasn't dead… I crawled back into the barn and there were men in there. Most were dead and some were dying."

Fahey was one of only a handful who lived to reveal the facts of the Wormhoudt Massacre.

The barn at La Plaine au Bois, near Wormhoudt, which marks the site of the massacre on May 28, 1940. This is a reconstruction of the original structure that stood on the site at the time of the killings, the latter having been demolished around 1960. (Historic Military Press)

DYNAMO TERMINATED

The night of June 3/4 was, declared Vice-Admiral Ramsay, to be the last of Operation *Dynamo*. All Allied ships were ordered to leave Dunkirk by 02.30 hours on the 4th. "We berthed alongside the Mole for the last time at midnight," remembered Sub Lieutenant Graves on the requisitioned paddle steamer *Medway Queen*. "Machine-gun fire could be clearly heard. This time we took on about 400 French soldiers, all the BEF had by this time left."

One of the last vessels to leave that night was the Royal Navy's destroyer HMS *Shikari*, which managed to sneak into Dunkirk and pick up 600 men of the French rearguard. The remainder of their colleagues were not so lucky and soon found themselves in German hands. It was at 08.00 hours that enemy troops reached Bastion 32, the French naval headquarters in Dunkirk, where General Beaufrère formally surrendered. Ninety minutes later the Germans were at the foot of the East Mole, which was still packed with helpless French soldiers.

Some of the many who reached safety. A train full of evacuated soldiers, British and French, is welcomed at a stop during its journey inland away from one of the South Coast ports. (Historic Military Press)

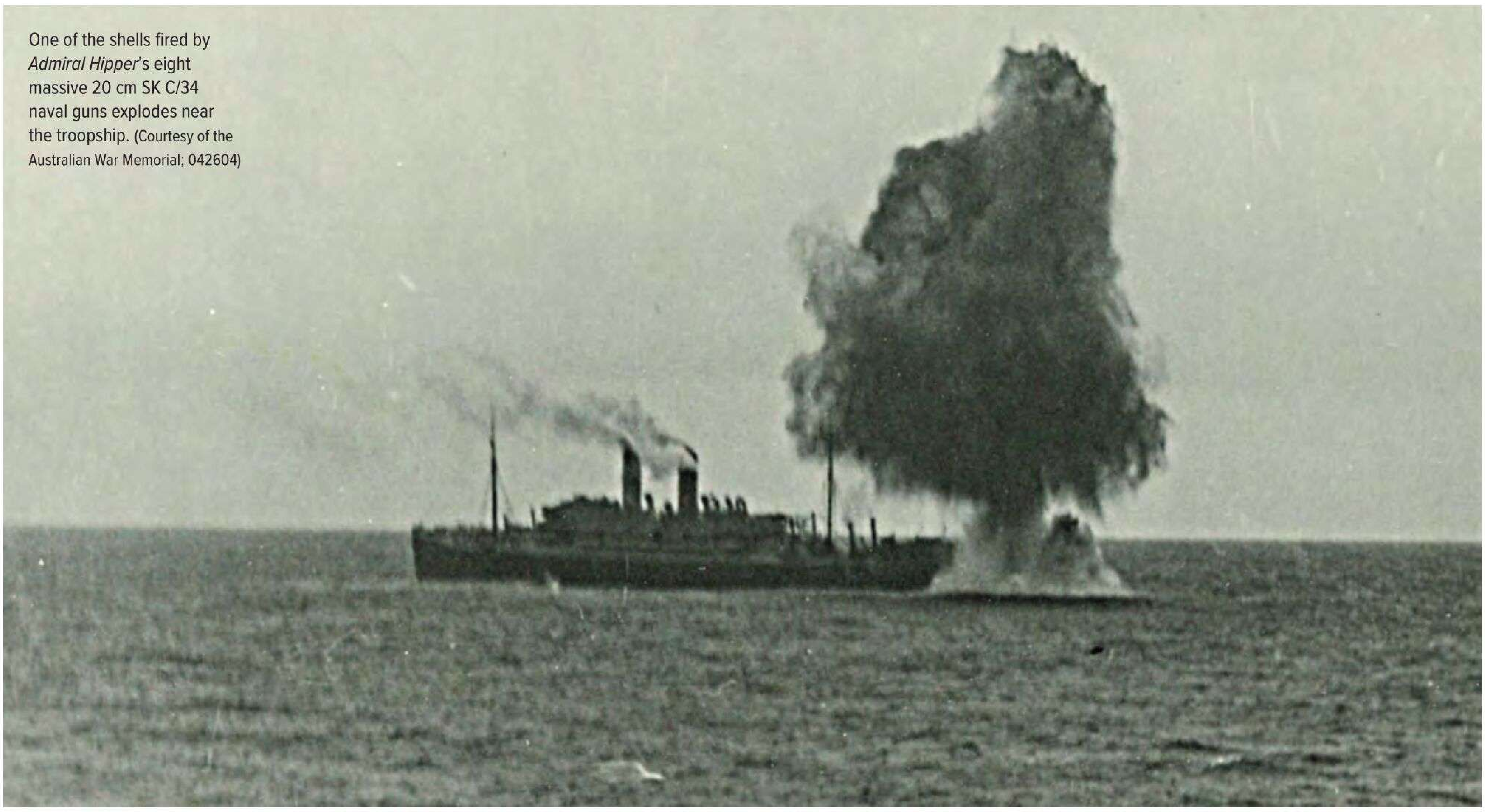
As a result of the rescue effort that night, no less than 26,175 men were landed back in the UK, making a staggering total of 338,226 who had been rescued from France since May 27. Winston Churchill duly told the House of Commons that Operation *Dynamo* had been "a miracle of deliverance". It was achieved, he said, "by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all.

"The enemy was hurled back by the retreating British and French troops. He was so roughly handled that he did not harry their departure seriously. The Royal Air Force engaged the main strength of the German Air Force, and inflicted upon them losses of at least four to one; and the Navy, using nearly 1,000 ships of all kinds, carried over 335,000 men, French and British, out of the jaws of death… Could there have been an objective of greater military importance and significance for the whole purpose of the war than this?"

No one, however, underestimated the scale of the losses that the BEF had incurred. Some 2,472 guns, 20,000 motorcycles, and almost 65,000 other vehicles had been abandoned, including virtually every one of the 445 tanks sent to France. In addition, 416,000 tons of stores, more than 75,000 tons of ammunition and 162,000 tons of fuel were destroyed or left behind. The RAF also lost 145 aircraft, including 42 Spitfires. Total RAF losses for the Battle of France were 959, a number only marginally less than the Battle of Britain which was to follow. It was the heaviest defeat in British history until the debacle in Singapore in the winter of 1941/42.

Churchill wisely sought to dampen down the widespread jubilation with which *Dynamo* was reported by the press and received by the public. "We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory," he told the House. "Wars are not won by evacuations."

Taken by a German soldier in the immediate aftermath of Operation *Dynamo*, this picture shows abandoned British and French vehicles on the quayside in the harbour at Dunkirk, with, in the background, the East Mole or jetty that proved so important during the evacuation. (Historic Military Press)


One of the shells fired by *Admiral Hipper*'s eight massive 20 cm SK C/34 naval guns explodes near the troopship. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; 042604)

TROOPSHIP SUNK IN NORTH SEA

In the early hours of June 4, 1940, a German naval force sailed from the port of Kiel and headed north. The small fleet, which included the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and the cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, all under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Marschall, had been deployed to carry out Operation *Juno*, the main aim of which was to disrupt the evacuation of Norway by attacking Allied shipping in and around the Norwegian port of Harstad.

During the evening of June 6, and throughout the next day, the German ships were refuelled by the tanker *Dittmarschen*, which had been camouflaged as a Russian freighter. A signal was then received reporting that a British convoy was at sea some 150 miles south-east of the Germans' position. Revising his plans, at 03.00 hours on June 8, Marschall decided to operate against the suspected convoy. Generaladmiral Alfred Saalwächter responded by reminding Marschall that the main mission remained the destruction of Allied naval forces in the Harstad-Narvik area. A compromise was agreed whereby *Admiral Hipper* and two destroyers would search for the convoy. *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* would, meanwhile, still attack Harstad. Then, learning that aerial reconnaissance had found Harstad empty, Marschall decided to vary his orders still further and hunt down Allied vessels in the North Sea.

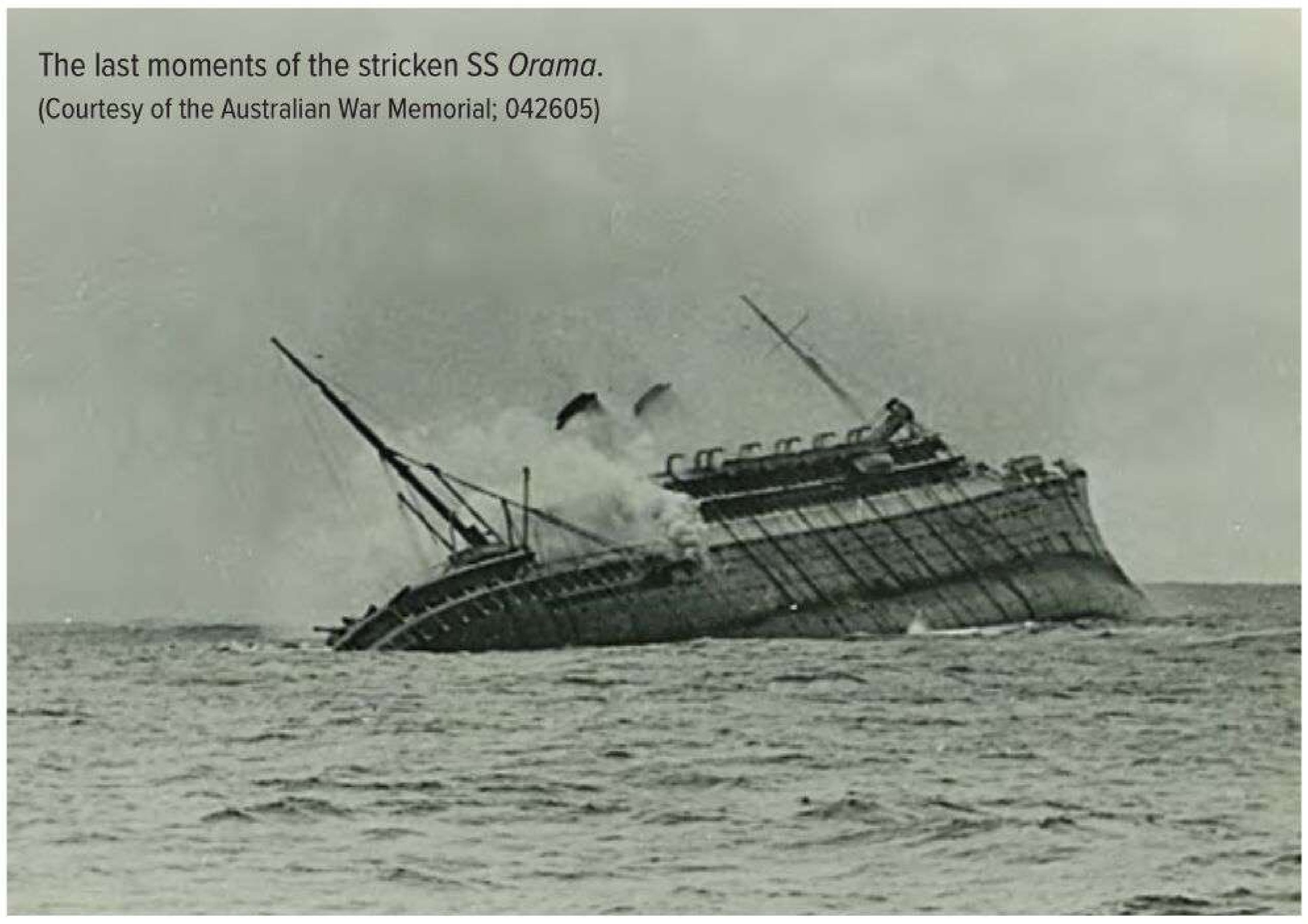
At 05.31 hours on June 8, the German warships located the tanker SS *Oil Pioneer* and its escort, the armed trawler HMS *Jupiter*, both of which had sailed from the Tromsö area on the 6th. They were promptly sunk without being able to signal their plight. Next, they encountered the hospital ship HMHS *Atlantis*, which *Scharnhorst* allowed to continue, along with her cargo of more than 600 wounded Allied soldiers.

The search for the Allied convoy continued with the help of aircraft from *Admiral Hipper* and *Scharnhorst*. When the two German battleships were directed to investigate a reported Royal Navy force, it fell to *Admiral Hipper* to deal with what was described as an armed merchant cruiser to the north. The latter proved to be the 19,840-ton liner SS *Orama*, which was spotted travelling independently 300 miles west of Narvik.

Converted to a troopship in 1940, the ex-Orient Line vessel had been used to transport troops to Norway following the German invasion. With the failure of the campaign, she had returned to assist in the evacuation. However, she had been sent home alone and unloaded the previous day because she had arrived without sufficient oil or water to await her group.

As *Orama* was a much larger proposition than HMS *Jupiter*, *Hipper*'s commander, Kapitän zur See Hellmuth Heye, opted to employ the cruiser's eight massive 20cm SK C/34 naval guns. Fifty-four rounds later and the one-sided engagement was over.

At 11.06 hours, *Orama* sank in the icy waters of the North Sea, taking 20 of her crew with her. The remaining 275 persons on board – which included 100 German prisoners of war being transferred to the UK – were taken aboard the German cruiser and two destroyers.


The last moments of the stricken SS *Orama*. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; 042605)

HMS GLORIOUS IS SUNK

During the onslaught from *Admiral Hipper*'s guns, the wireless room on *Orama* had been able to send an SOS. This distress signal, however, was successfully jammed by German radio operators. Consequently, the Royal Navy had yet to learn of the presence of Admiral Wilhelm Marschall's potent force. As a result, the last act of a bad day for the Royal Navy had yet to be played out.

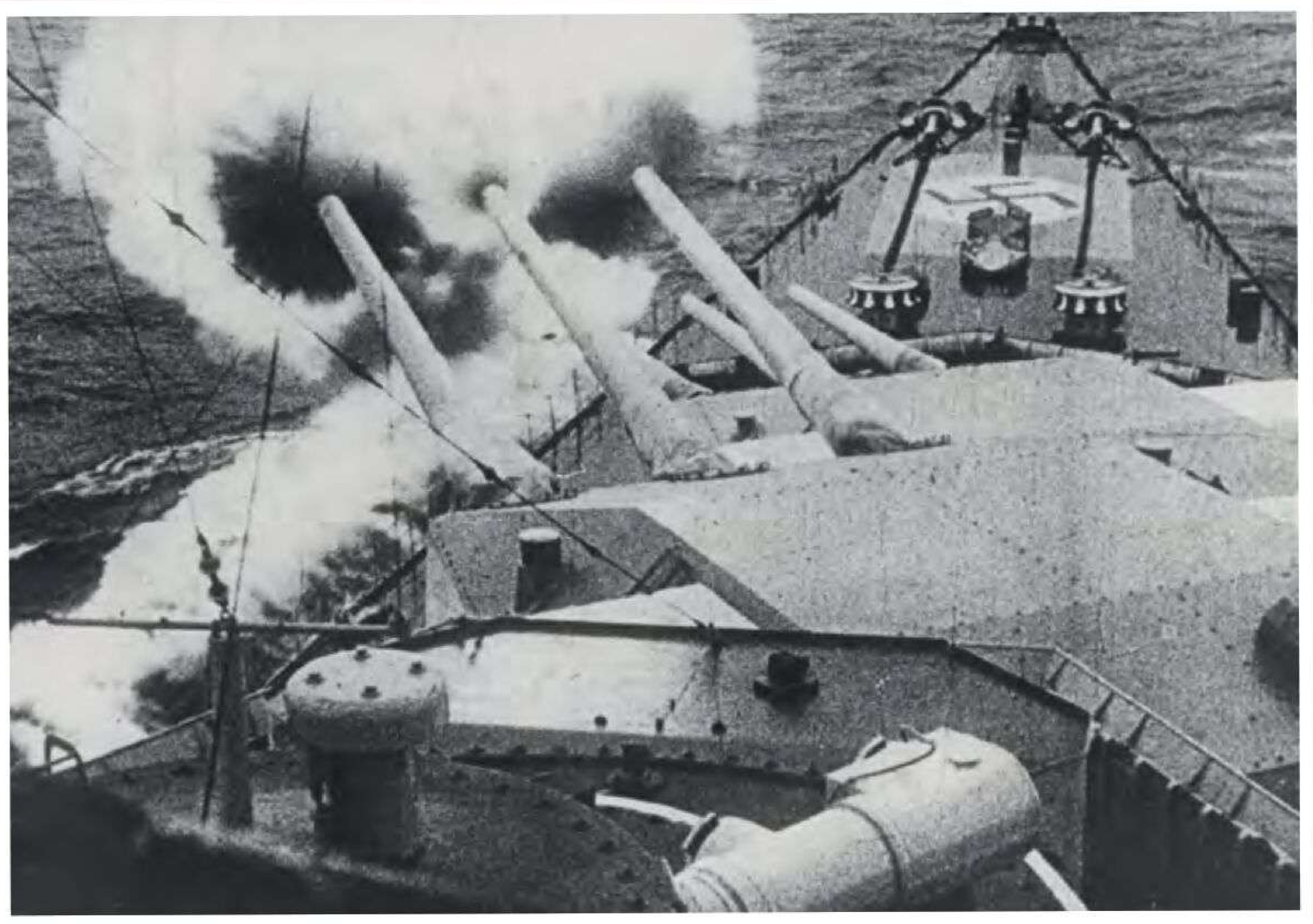
Having sent *Admiral Hipper* to Trondheim for fuel, Admiral Marschall ordered *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* to head towards Harstad and Tromsø. At 16.45 hours, a look-out on *Scharnhorst* sighted smoke off the battleship's starboard bow. As they approached, the unmistakable silhouette of an aircraft carrier emerged from the haze. The German warships had intercepted the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*.

The aircraft carrier made off at full speed to the south and attempted to deploy her Swordfish. But it was too late, and *Gneisenau* opened fire first at 17.28 hours; *Scharnhorst* followed four minutes later at a range of nearly 28,000 yards.

As the historian T K Derry detailed, "The forward upper hangar was hit at an early stage, starting a fire which destroyed the Hurricanes and prevented any torpedoes being got ready. A salvo hit the bridge about five o'clock, and a heavy shell, striking aft about a quarter of an hour later, virtually finished the action so far as the *Glorious* was concerned."

Despite the valiant defence of the carrier's escorts – the destroyers HMS *Acasta* and HMS *Ardent* – all three British vessels were sunk. On *Glorious*, the order to abandon ship came at about 17.20 hours. Just twenty minutes later she finally slipped beneath the waves. In total 1,531 servicemen lost their lives; less than fifty survived from HMS *Glorious*, two from HMS *Ardent*, and just one from HMS *Acasta* (two survivors from this destroyer were picked up by a German seaplane five days after the sinking – one of them died later of his wounds).

During its heroic last stand, *Acasta* had managed to hit *Scharnhorst* aft with a torpedo, putting the battleship's after-turret out of action and causing a water leak that made the centre and starboard main engines unusable. Both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were forced to withdraw to Trondheim.


The onslaught continues as *Gneisenau* takes its turn at engaging HMS *Glorious* and the two escorting destroyers. (USNHHC)

Passing within fifty nautical miles of the action involving HMS Glorious, of which she had been unaware, had been the heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire. Sailing independently for the Clyde, onboard were members of the Norwegian royal family and government, numerous Allied diplomats (461 passengers in total) and 49 tons of gold. Disastrous though the day had been, it could have been even worse.

The loss of *Glorious* was of serious concern to the British government. The Royal Navy had entered the war with only five large aircraft carriers, and one of these, *Courageous*, had already been sent to the bottom. So, the loss of a second so soon after, along with the valuable aircraft and experienced airmen that had been on board, was a serious blow to Britain's war effort.

The battleship *Scharnhorst* firing her forward 283mm guns during the engagement with HMS *Glorious* and her escorts on June 8, 1940. (USNHHC)

ITALY DECLARES WAR

Having maintained a thin veneer of impartiality so far in the war, Mussolini, perhaps no longer able to sit back and watch his fascist ally swallow up Europe so easily or mindful of the opportunity to eliminate Anglo-French domination in the Mediterranean, joined the Axis cause and declared war on Britain and France.

The Italian Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, duly informed his ambassadors in London and Paris that the relevant notice would be handed to the British and French ambassadors in Rome at around 16.30 hours, local time, on Monday, June 10, 1940. Ciano later noted in his diary that when he handed over the declaration to Sir Percy Loraine, the British ambassador, at 16.45 hours, the latter "did not bat an eyelid".

Mussolini personally broke the news to a huge crowd that had gathered in the Palazzo Venezia in central Rome that same evening. Translations of Il Duce's speech were published in newspapers throughout the UK in the days that followed, in this case the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*: "Fighters of the land, the sea, and the air, Blackshirts of the revolutions and of the legions, men and women of Italy, of the Empire, and other Kingdom of Albania, listen: The hour marked out by destiny is sounding in the sky of our country – this, the hour of irrevocable decisions.

"The declaration of war has already been handed to the Ambassadors of Britain and France. We are going to war against the plutocratic and reactionary Democracies of the West who have hindered the advance and often threatened the existence even of the Italian people… Now that the die is cast and we have of our own will burned the bridges behind us, I solemnly declare that Italy does not intend to drag other peoples, who are her neighbours by sea and by land, into the conflict."

Despite the defiant words from the Italian leader, Ciano was concerned. "Mussolini speaks from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia," he continued in his diary. "The news of the war does not surprise anyone and does not arouse very much enthusiasm. I am sad, very sad. The adventure begins. May God help Italy."

SAVOIA
SAVOIA
ALLA DALLA ITALIA SARTORIA

Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini greet a waiting crowd from an open-top car during the latter's visit to Munich on June 18, 1940, the day after France had sought surrender terms. (Polish National Archives)

Accompanied by a number of senior Italian officers, Mussolini confers with General Umberto di Savoia during an inspection of a captured village in the French Alps in June 1940. (Polish National Archives)

Within hours of Italy's declaration of war, Mussolini's forces made their first moves against France. Initially confined to small-scale skirmishes and air raids, it was not until June 21 that the Italians launched a general offensive along the Alpine front.

In the UK, the news that Italy had entered the war alongside Germany brought an immediate response. Anti-Italian sentiment brought out in towns and cities across the country, with businesses and families with apparent Italian connections being targeted by angry mobs. Resident Italians were also considered for internment following Italy's declaration of war on Britain on 10 June 1940. Some 4,000 resident Italians who were known to be members of the Italian Fascist Party and others aged between 16 and 70 who had lived in the UK for fewer than 20 years were ordered to be interned.

OPERATION AERIAL

RAF personnel crowd the deck of a steamer during Operation *Aerial*, possibly at Brest, during June 1940. (MoD/Crown Copyright)

The withdrawal of the BEF from Dunkirk was not seen by Churchill as the end of Britain's involvement in France. Though the French armies were in disarray, Churchill still hoped that with the support of more British troops, the French would regroup and fight on.

There were still large numbers of British troops in France, as many as 100,000 men according to some sources, that had not been evacuated from Dunkirk and Churchill ordered them to be reinforced by other units from the UK. The new arrivals included the British 52nd (Lowland) Division, which started arriving on June 7, and the 1st Canadian Division, which first reached France on June 12. Together these could be formed into a second Expeditionary Force to help the French. This new force was placed under the leadership of Lieutenant General Alan Brooke who had been redeployed from his command of the original BEF's II Corps.

However, soon after returning to France, Brooke realised that the French were no longer willing or able to carry on fighting and that the only way to avoid yet another catastrophe was to evacuate all the British personnel still left in France. Under the codename Operation *Aerial*, arrangements were quickly put in hand to take off the British troops from, amongst others, the ports of Cherbourg, Saint-Malo, Nantes, Brest, Saint-Nazaire and La Pallice. Though many units had already been moving towards some of the selected ports for a few days, the operation officially began on June 15. Over the course of the next three days more than 30,000 men were evacuated from Cherbourg, 21,474 from Saint-Marlo and 32,584 from Brest alone.

One of the home ports to which the men were taken was Falmouth. A young boy at the time, Vic Angrove recalled the sights he witnessed in his memoirs, *Challenges*: "Boats of every description were coming across the Channel filled with service personnel and civilians escaping to freedom… They were so tired and hungry; that is one memory I will never forget. Mother had made pasties for tea, but when we went to the High Street and saw the state of the soldiers laying anywhere they could find, Mother went home and made cups of tea, took the pasties from the oven and gave them to the soldiers who were really exhausted."

In conjunction with Operation *Cycle*, which was the evacuation of British and Allied troops from Le Havre on June 10-13, and smaller efforts from locations such as Saint-Valéry-en-Caux (before it fell to Erwin Rommel's troops on June 12), some 191,870 soldiers and thousands of support workers were rescued from France by June 25, when *Aerial* was terminated. This number comprised 144,171 British troops, 18,246 Frenchmen, 24,352 Poles, 4,938 Czechs and 163 Belgians. Although much equipment was lost, 310 artillery guns, 2,292 vehicles, 1,800 tons of stores and a small number of tanks were also recovered. It seemed that, once again, prompt decisive action had saved the British Army from total disaster.

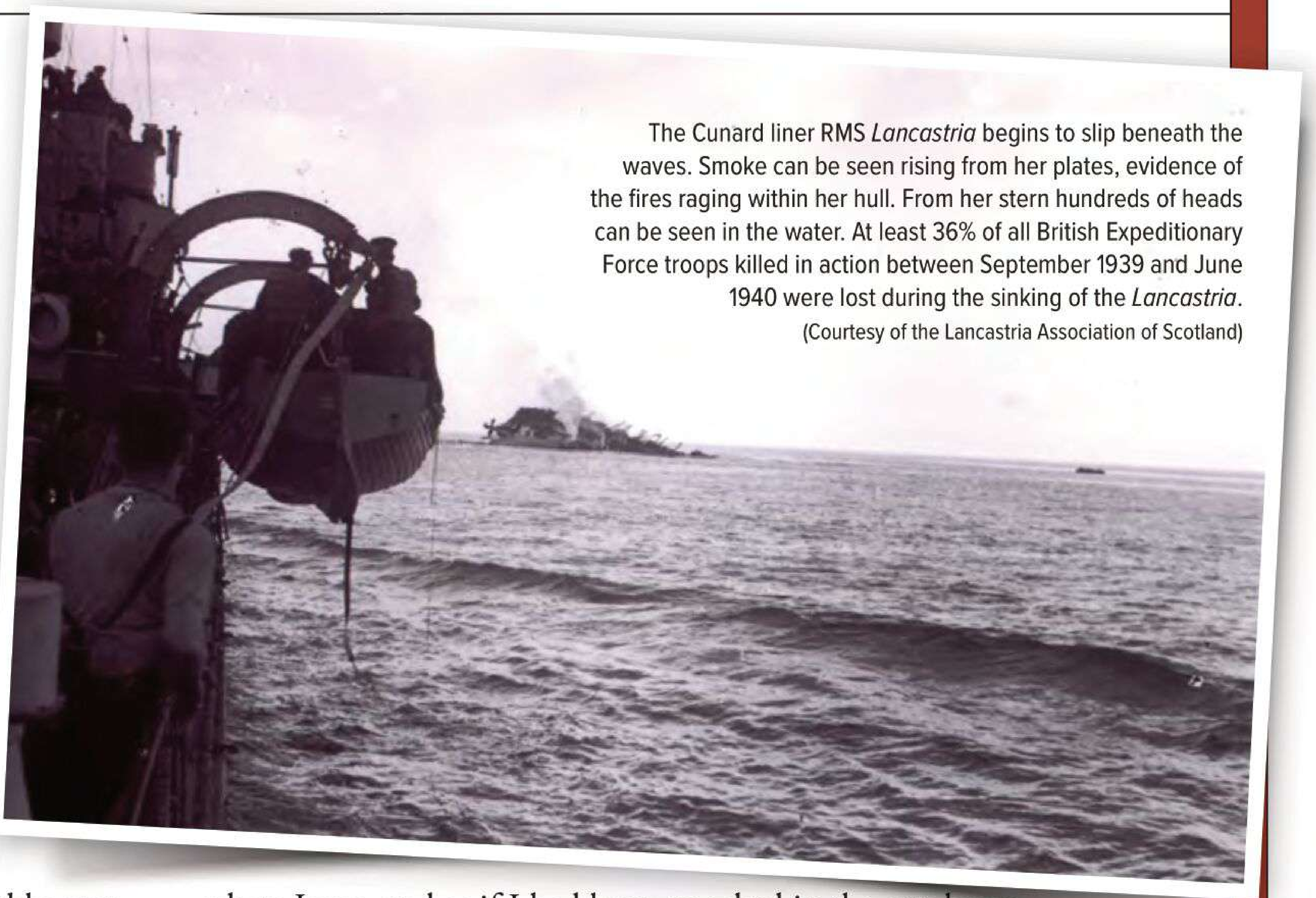
British and French troops are lead away into captivity during the Fall of France. Though this image is often captioned as having been taken at Dunkirk, it depicts the scene along the coast at St Valery sur Somme. (Library of Congress)

THE LANCASTRIA DISASTER

In the early hours of June 17, large numbers of RAF personnel, civilian workers and their families who had been left behind in France when the Dunkirk evacuation was called to a halt, made their way towards the docks at Saint-Nazaire in preparation for their journey back to the UK on the 16,243-ton RMS *Lancastria*.

Skippered by Captain Rudolf Sharp, the liner had left Liverpool three days earlier, arriving in the Loire estuary on June 16. She was just one of a number of ships that had been sent to the French port to help with the evacuation. *Lancastria* duly dropped anchor in the Charpentier Roads, some six miles out from the port, at 04.00 hours on the 17th – despite the fact that Sharp had been advised by a local French pilot skipper that to be anchored there during daylight was like "putting your head in the noose".

With *Lancastria* at anchor there, the loading of evacuees was to be carried out by smaller vessels from the docks. The process started at around 06.00 hours and continued throughout the morning of the 17th. By lunchtime, the ship was packed. Though *Lancastria*'s normal complement was little more than 2,300, including crew, she was considerably over capacity. Because of the confused and hectic nature of events at Saint-Nazaire at that time, it will never be known exactly how many people had boarded – estimates vary from between 4,000 to 9,000 passengers.


The Cunard liner RMS *Lancastria* begins to slip beneath the waves. Smoke can be seen rising from her plates, evidence of the fires raging within her hull. From her stern hundreds of heads can be seen in the water. At least 36% of all British Expeditionary Force troops killed in action between September 1939 and June 1940 were lost during the sinking of the *Lancastria*.
(Courtesy of the Lancastria Association of Scotland)

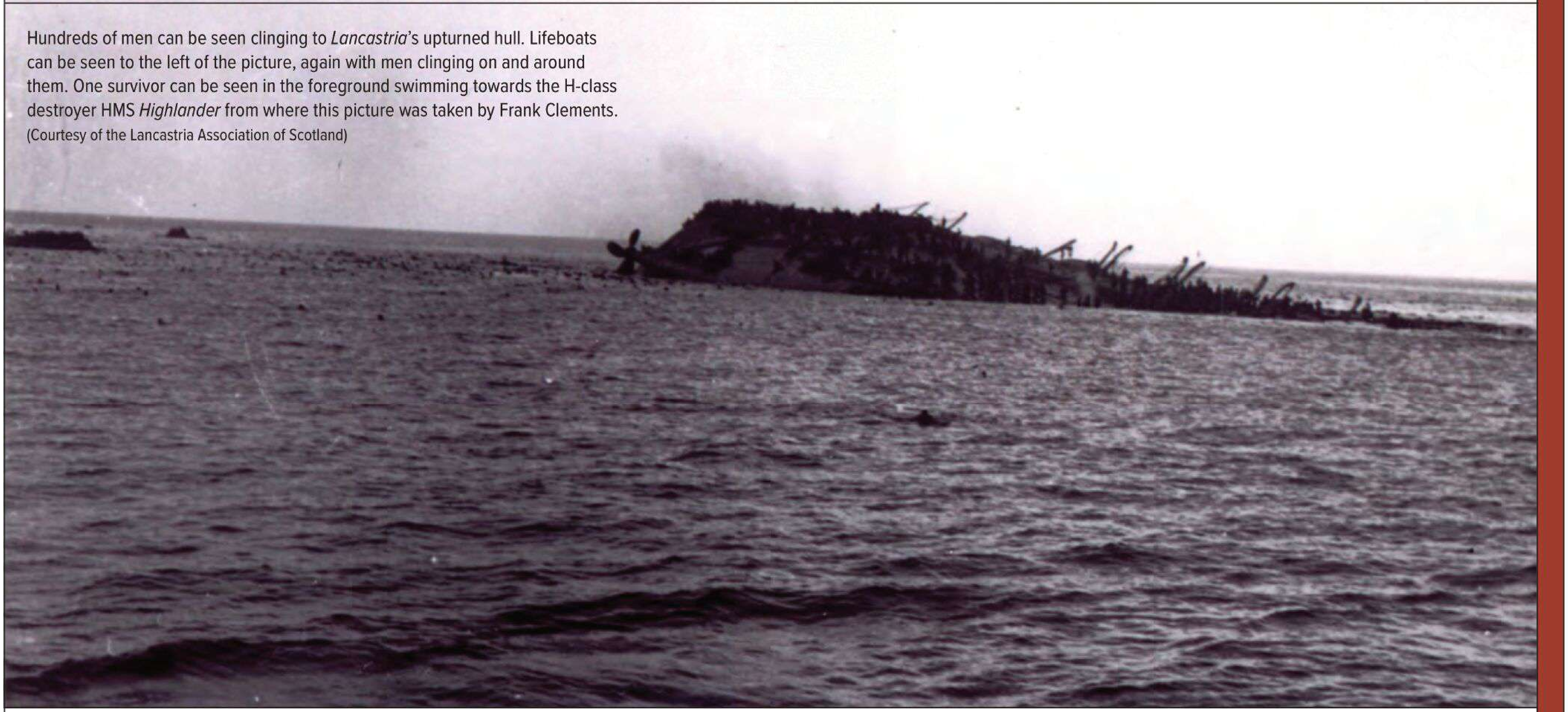
At 14.00 hours, just as the loaded liner was preparing to sail, the Luftwaffe made an appearance over Saint-Nazaire. Among the many targets sought out by the German crews was the 20,000-ton liner SS *Oronsay*, which was hit several times. Captain Sharp was advised to put to sea immediately, but with no destroyer escort available as protection against submarines he opted to wait. The delay would prove fatal.

At 15.43 hours the sirens again sounded as Junkers Ju 88s of KG 30 flew into view. This time it was *Lancastria* that was the main target. Two bombs fell into the water off her port side and the over-full ship began to roll as the passengers shifted away from the blast. Then one of the Junkers swooped low over the liner and seconds later a massive explosion shook the ship, followed in quick succession by three more.

"I was lying down at the time," recalled M B Andexser RAF, "and there was one almighty bang, that seemed to lift me clean off the deck where I was, and as if I had been smacked in the ears by an unseen force. What followed in the complete black hold full of burning smoke was terrible."

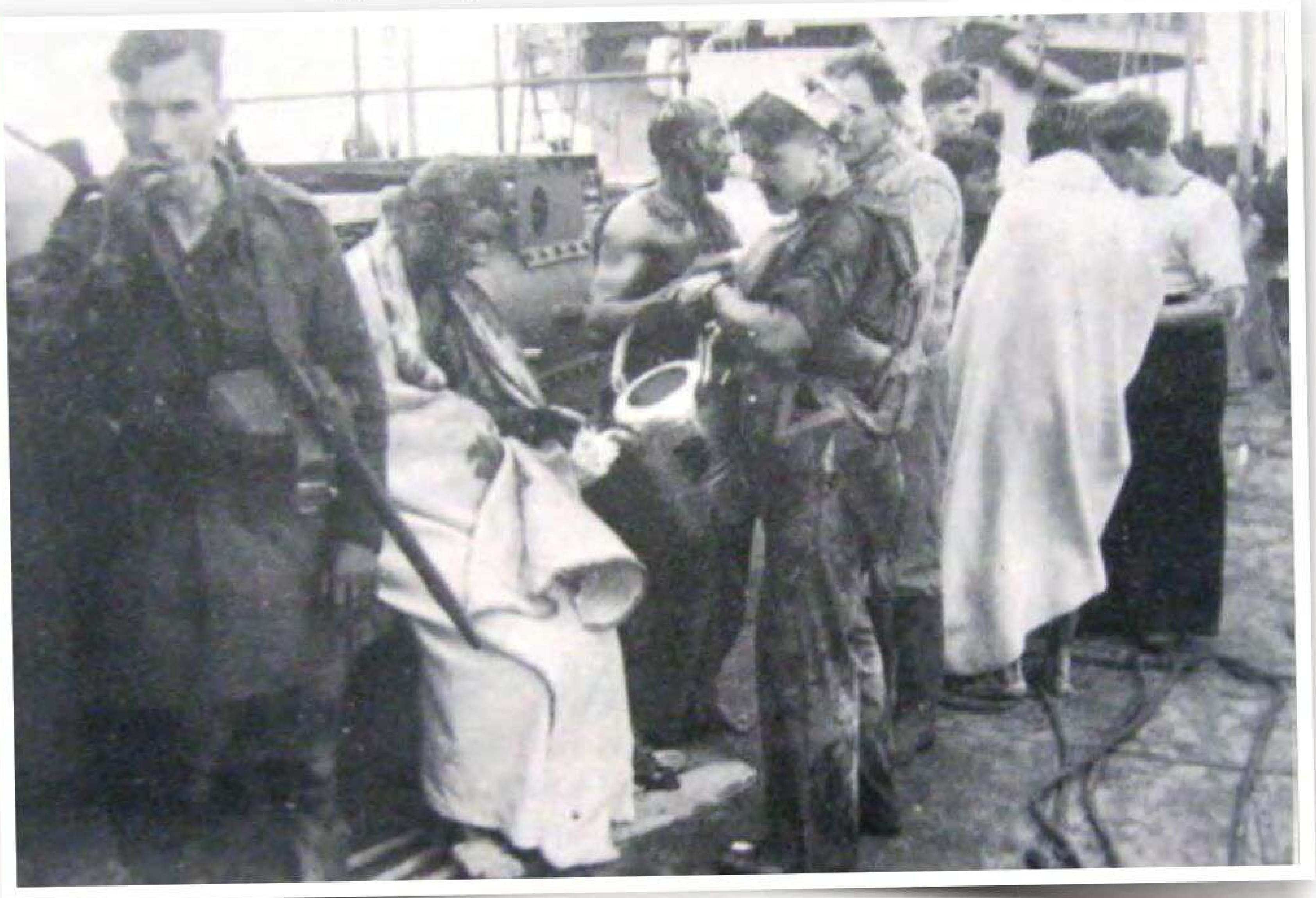
One of the women on board, Sister Chamley, a Church Army worker, later recalled the moment the German raiders struck: "Through an open porthole we saw a black cloud in the sky moving very fast. It turned out to be five or six aeroplanes which, as soon as they were over the ship, released bombs. We rushed on deck and, hearing the order 'Women and children first', got into a lifeboat while men were sliding into the sea by ropes and others leapt overboard."

Chief Officer Grattidge was in his cabin when the bombs struck: "Four times the *Lancastria* bucked and shuddered like an animal in pain. I ran topside to the bridge... For a moment it was impossible to see anything. Vast clouds of inky smoke came pumping over us. The smell of oil caught me in the pit of the stomach – one bomb at least must have burst down No.3 hold, releasing about 500 tons of fuel oil. That meant a running fire, the most difficult of blazes to control aboard a ship... Then the smoke drifted and parted, and we saw the


Hundreds of men can be seen clinging to *Lancastria*'s upturned hull. Lifeboats can be seen to the left of the picture, again with men clinging on and around them. One survivor can be seen in the foreground swimming towards the H-class destroyer HMS *Highlander* from where this picture was taken by Frank Clements.
(Courtesy of the Lancastria Association of Scotland)

most terrible sight the *Lancastria* could offer; the mess of blood and oil and splintered woodwork that littered the deck and the furious core of water that came roaring from the bottom of the ship in No.4 hold. I knew now where the fourth bomb had gone."

The liner was indeed going down. At first the bow started to slip lower into the water and then she began to list to starboard. Grattidge grabbed a loudhailer and ordered everyone to move across to the other side of the ship. Slowly she righted herself, but the weight of thousands of people was too great and she tipped over to port. This time there would be no chance of restoring her balance as thousands of passengers and crew lined up on deck in readiness to abandon ship. *Lancastria* sunk lower by the bows and then rolled onto her port side before, at 16.12 hours, disappearing beneath the surface of the Loire estuary.



Survivors on board HMS *Highlander*. Though he survived the sinking of *Lancastria*, Captain Rudolf Sharp OBE did not survive the war, being killed when the troopship *Laconia* was sunk by *U-156* in September 1942. (Historic Military Press)

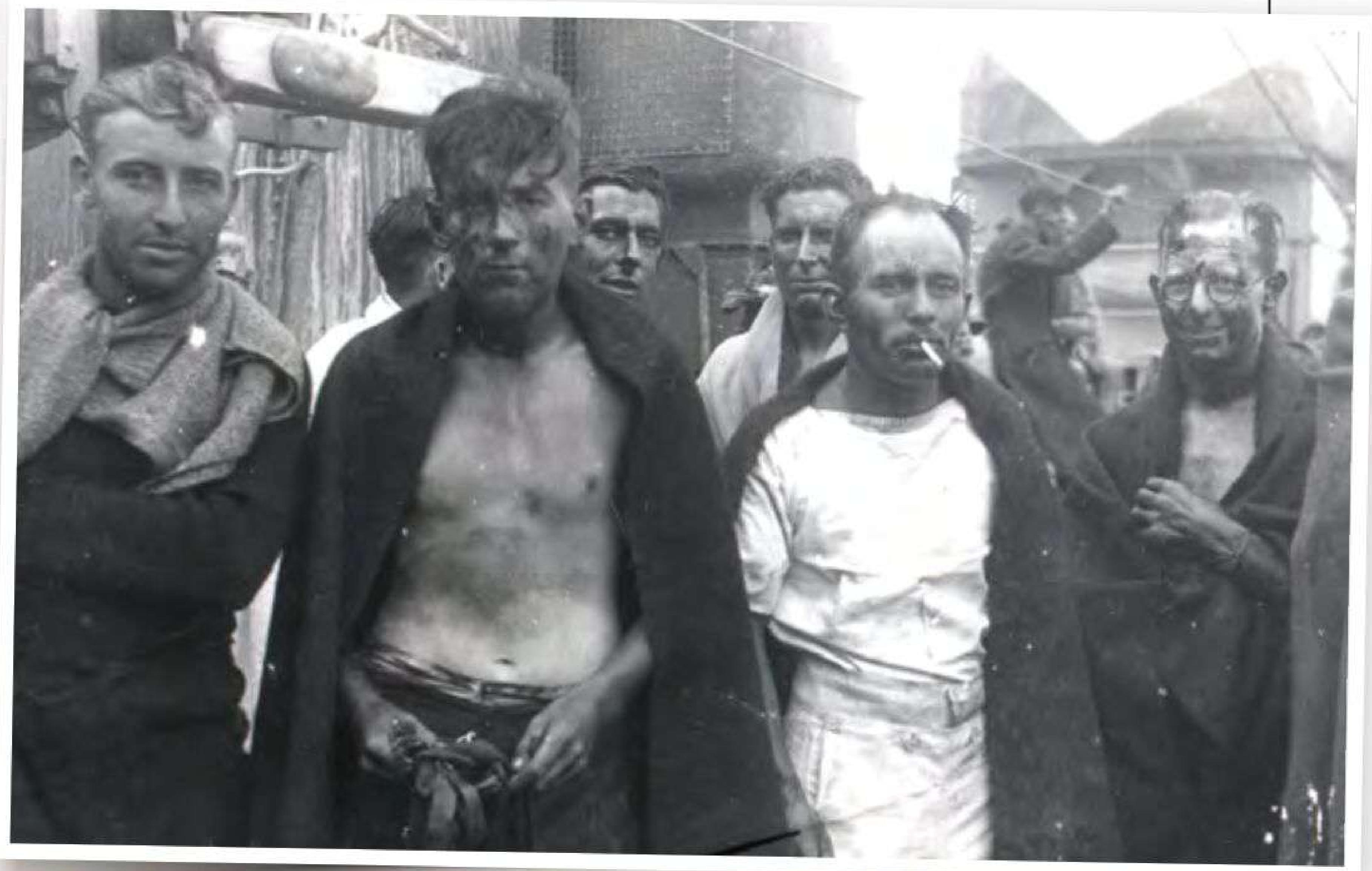
Rescue efforts by the other vessels in the vicinity were hampered by the continuing German air raid. It was only when the 45-minute attack abated that work could begin in earnest. The captain of a French trawler that moved up to help later recalled: "When we arrived near the indicated area we were horrified at the site. Hundreds of men were struggling in the sea. We went down in our boats to recover the wounded and those that had escaped the sinking. It was dreadful to see."

One unnamed Army officer later recalled that "the most dreadful thing was the cries of those who couldn't swim and there weren't enough lifebelts to go round. You heard 'Help Me! I can't swim' – and you couldn't do anything."

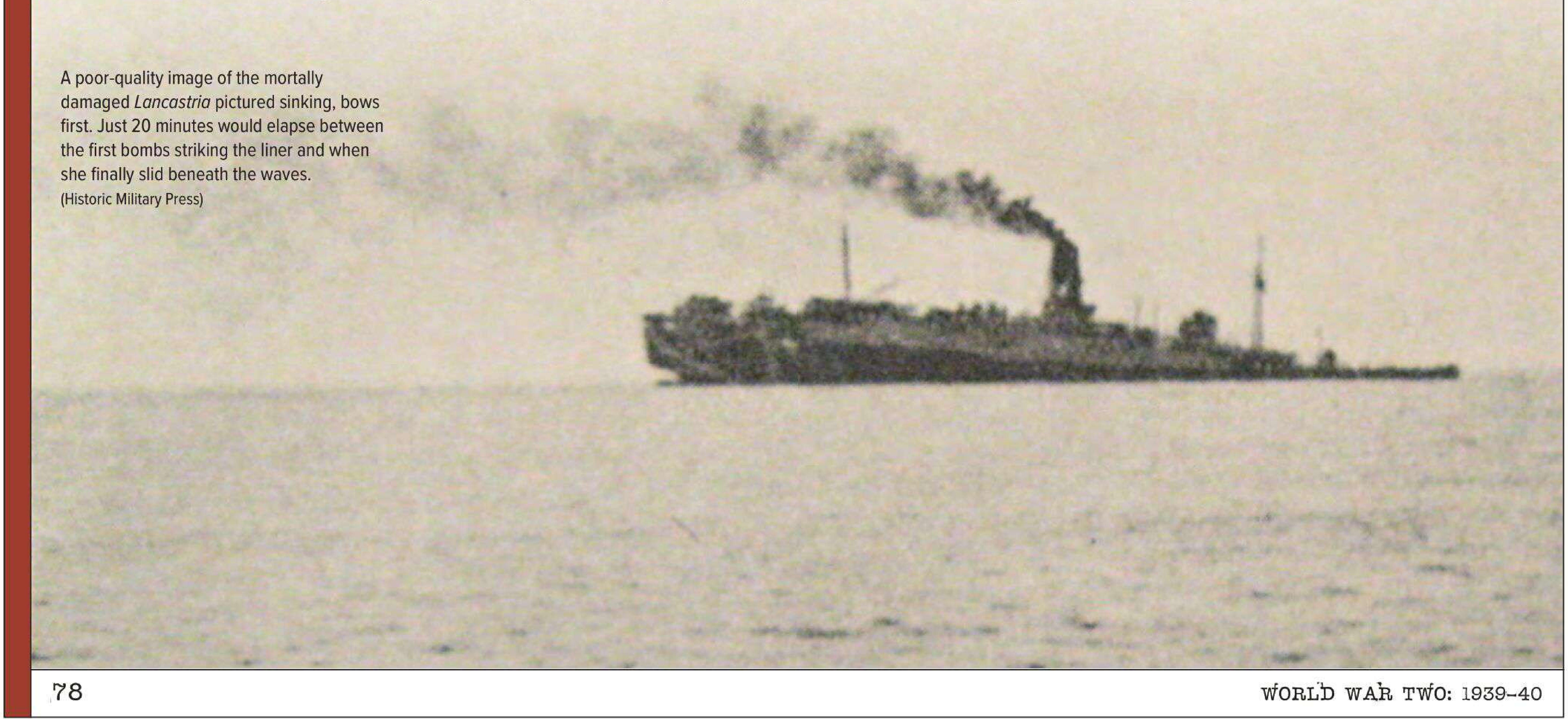
The BEF's senior veterinary officer, Major Plunket, was very matter of fact in his diary: "Embarked by lighter at 9am on HMT *Lancastria*, had breakfast, went to sleep. Woke up at 1:30 pm. Lunch 3 pm. Ship hit by bombs at 3:50, had sunk completely by 4:15. Left the ship by lifeboat, was picked up by French trawler after about one hour."

Over the course of the following days bodies were being washed up all around the adjacent coastline. Precisely how many people died has never been satisfactorily established, with figures ranging from under 2,000 to as many as 6,000. This made *Lancastria*'s sinking Britain's worst-ever maritime disaster, far exceeding the losses of *Titanic* in 1912 and *Lusitania* in 1915.

Survivors of the disaster and relatives pictured at the wreck site during the 2010 commemoration events. In the foreground is the Lancastria buoy which marks the spot where the liner sank in June 1940. (Courtesy of the Lancastria Association of Scotland)

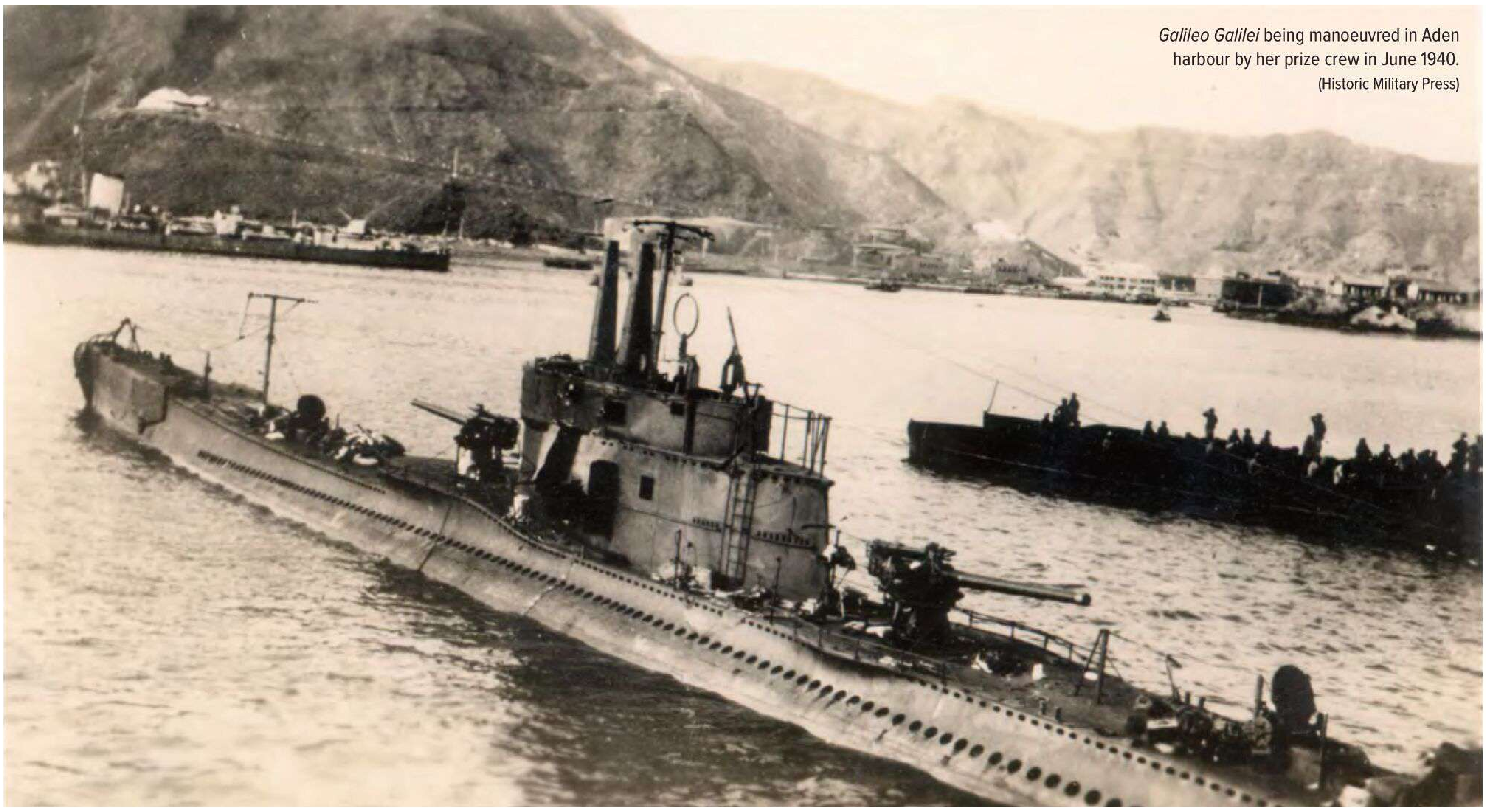


Tired, weary and covered in oil, this shot, again taken by Frank Clements, also shows survivors aboard the destroyer HMS *Highlander*. The survivor standing with the white blanket round his shoulders, behind the man with the cigarette in his mouth, has been identified as Donald Charles Bruce RASC. He later took part in the D-Day landings. (Courtesy of the Lancastria Association of Scotland)



A poor-quality image of the mortally damaged *Lancastria* pictured sinking, bows first. Just 20 minutes would elapse between the first bombs striking the liner and when she finally slid beneath the waves. (Historic Military Press)

ITALIAN SUBMARINE CAPTURED



Galileo Galilei being manoeuvred in Aden harbour by her prize crew in June 1940. (Historic Military Press)

Just hours after Italy's declaration of war on June 10, the Regia Maria's submarine *Galileo Galilei* left its base at Massaua in Ethiopia bound en route to its patrol area in the Gulf of Aden. After stopping and sinking the Norwegian tanker *James Stove* on June 16, *Galileo Galilei* encountered the Yugoslav freighter *Drava* on the afternoon of the 18th. A warning shot from the submarine's deck guns brought the merchant ship to halt, following which it boarded and searched. With everything in order, *Drava* was allowed to proceed. However, the gunfire had been heard by a shore-based observation post.

On a standing patrol, Flying Officer Gordon Haywood, at the controls of a 94 Squadron Gloster Gladiator, was duly altered. Operating from Sheikh Othman in Aden, Haywood spotted the Italian submarine on the surface and radioed for assistance. A Blenheim of 8 Squadron and a Vickers Vincent quickly joined him. Despite some defending fire from its conning tower, all three aircraft set about the submarine. Two anti-submarine bombs dropped by the Blenheim both missed, whilst the Vincent almost managed to blow itself up with the depth charges it was carrying. Unaffected by the Gladiator's machine-gun fire, *Galileo Galilei*'s crew crash-dived.

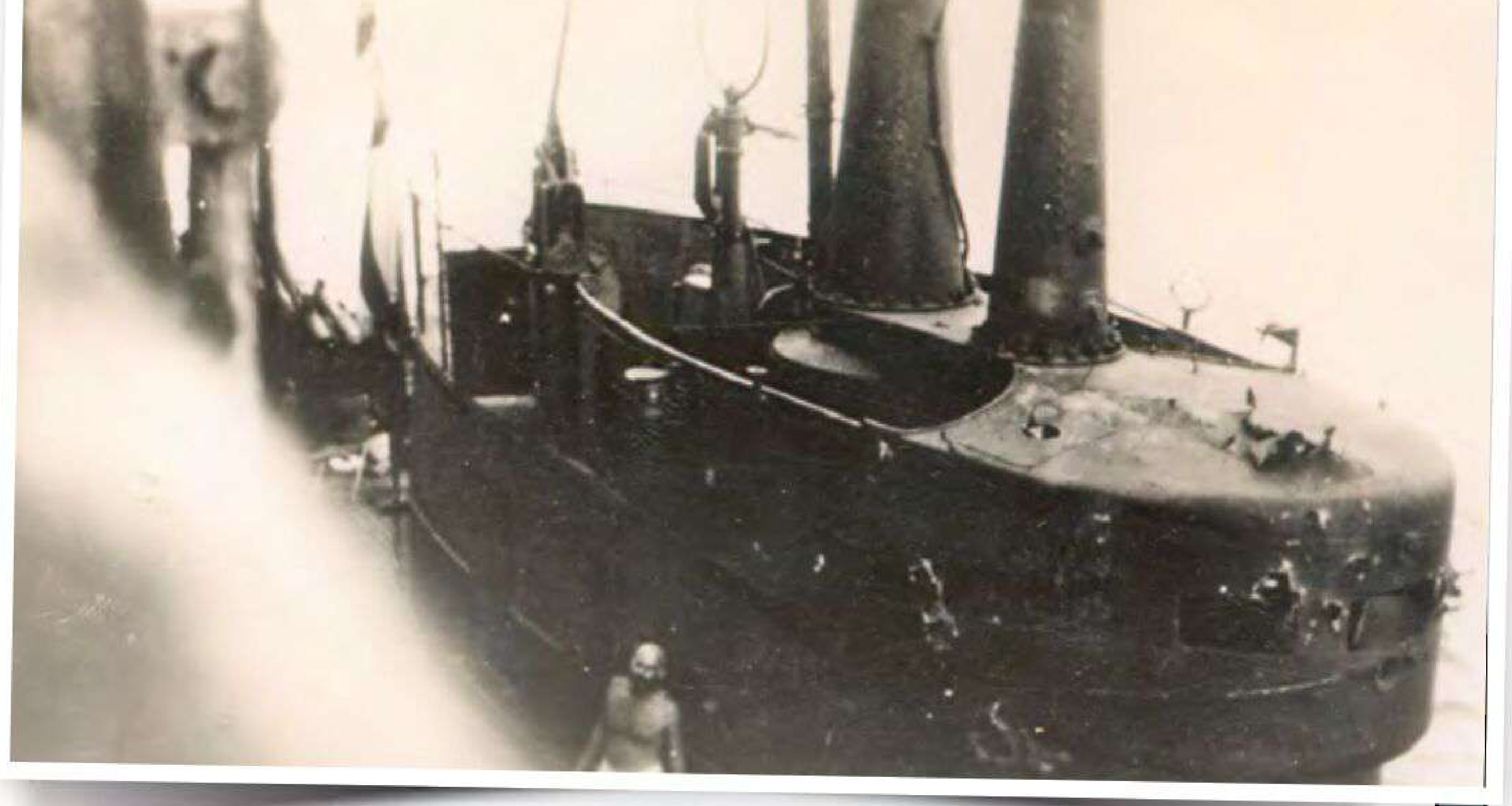
As darkness fell, two Royal Navy destroyers, HMS *Kandahar* and HMS *Shoreham*, arrived on the scene. The hunt for the Italian submarine immediately resumed. In the darkness, *Galileo Galilei*'s captain made a fatal mistake – he surfaced and began using his radio, the messages being picked up by *Kandahar*.

It was HMS *Shoreham* that made the first direct contact, but *Galileo Galilei* dived at 19.30 hours and successfully avoided two depth charge attacks. Believing that the submarine had been damaged, both *Kandahar* and *Shoreham* then departed, leaving an armed trawler, HMT *Moonstone*, on station alone. Throughout the night both *Moonstone* and further Blenheim bombers, this time from 203 Squadron, maintained the search.

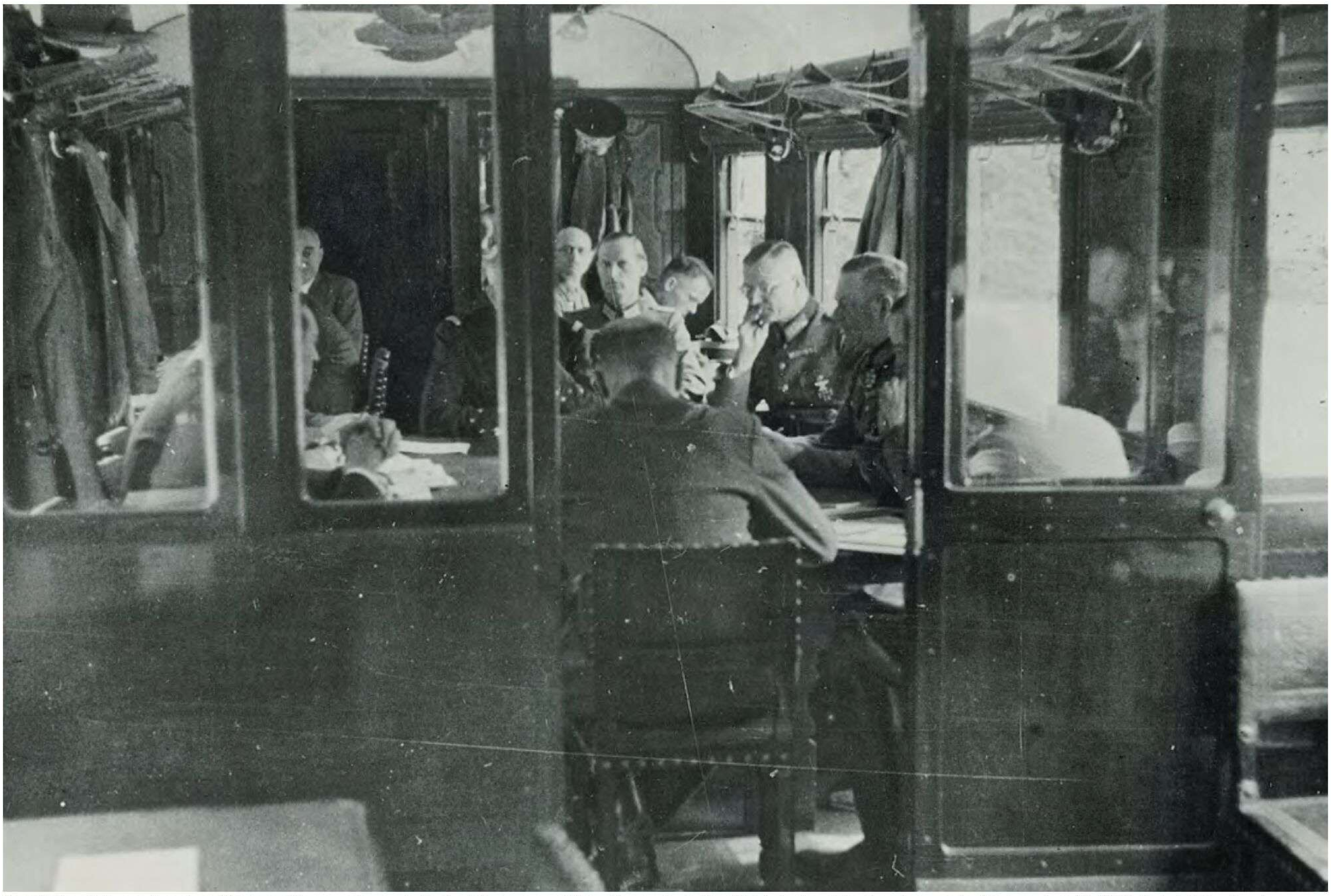
At 11.37 hours the following morning, an Asdic contact at last signalled the presence of the submarine. The trawler's skipper, Bosun W J H Moorman, ordered the dropping of a depth charge, followed by two more in quick succession.

Some three minutes later, perhaps believing that they could rid themselves of this diminutive trawler that was proving so irritating, *Galileo Galilei* surfaced about a mile astern and opened fire. Undeterred, Moorman ordered his crew to return fire. A number of rounds from *Moonstone*'s 4-inch gun scored hits on *Galileo Galilei*'s conning tower, one of which killed Capitano di Corvetta Nardi and a number of other officers. Other members of the submarine's crew were then spotted rushing up on deck. They hauled down their colours and waved white clothing as a sign of surrender. At 12.25 hours on June 19, *Moonstone* ceased fire.

At 13.34 hours, HMS *Kandahar* reached the scene and her crew, along with that of *Moonstone*, put a prize crew aboard the submarine which was taken in tow to Aden. The Allies' first successful capture of an Axis submarine in World War Two was confirmed.



The conning tower of *Galileo Galilei* pictured after the submarine has been brought into Aden. Evidence of the damage caused by the shells from HMT *Moonstone* can clearly be seen both to the front and side of the tower. (Historic Military Press)

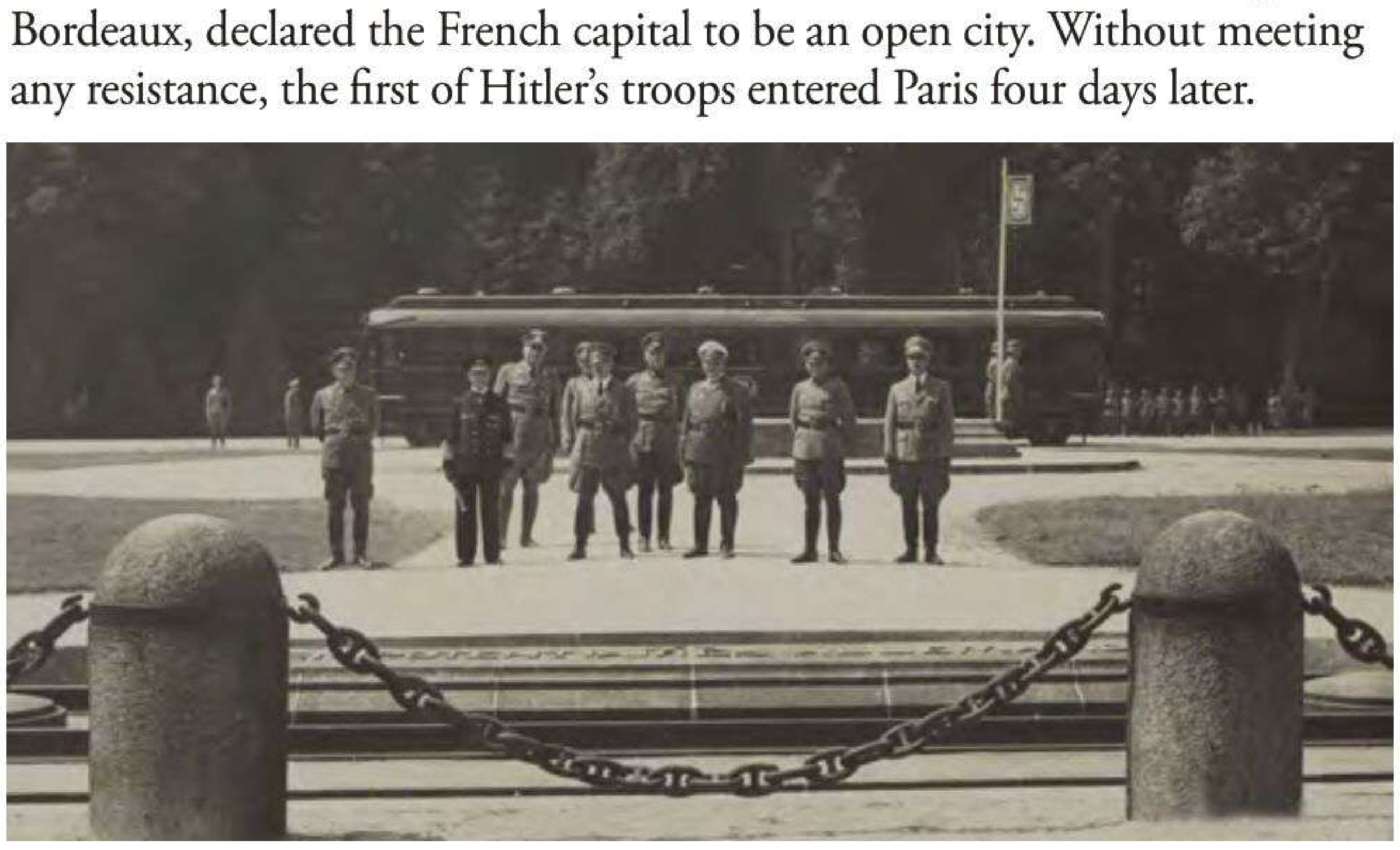


Negotiations between French and German officers underway in the Armistice wagon at Compiègne prior to the official signing of the French surrender there on June 22, 1940. (Historic Military Press)

FRANCE SIGNS AN ARMISTICE

When Winston Churchill was informed of the fate of *Lancastria* at Saint-Naziare, he immediately issued a Defence Notice, often simply referred to as a D-notice, prohibiting the publication of any news about the event. After the war he explained that "when this news came to me in the quiet Cabinet Room during the afternoon, I forbade its publication, saying: 'The newspapers have got quite enough disaster for today at least'."

The other disaster that the Prime Minister might have been referring to on that day, June 17, was the news that France had just sought an Armistice with Germany. In the face of the relentless German advance, the French Government had fled from Paris on June 10, and, heading for Bordeaux, declared the French capital to be an open city. Without meeting any resistance, the first of Hitler's troops entered Paris four days later.



Hitler and other senior German commanders are pictured at Compiègne on June 22, 1940, the day of the signing of the Armistice. (Historic Military Press)

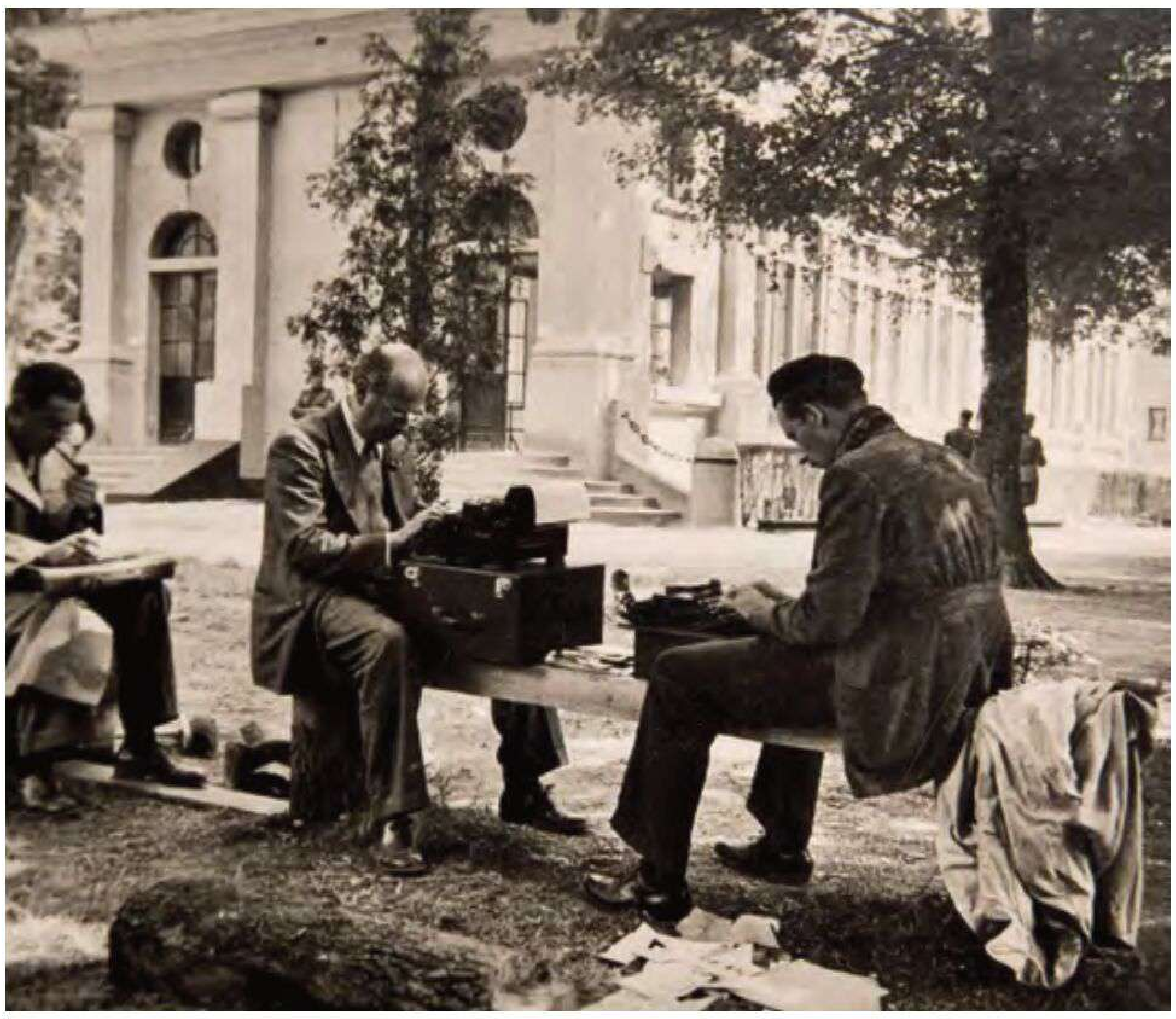
Even before the start of the Blitzkreig, the governments of both the United Kingdom and the French Republic had been considering numerous proposals to bolster their mutual defence. One of the very last of these, made at the same time that Paris fell, was the suggestion of two French politicians, René Pleven and Jean Monnet. In a stark sign of the desperate situation France found herself in, the two men outlined a plan under which the two countries would become one in a new union. The suggestion was duly put to the British War Cabinet on June 15, 1940.

Within hours, Churchill made the French prime minister, Paul Reynaud, a formal offer of "indissoluble union". The remarkable declaration, which was drafted by Monnet, Sir Arthur Salter, and Robert Vansittart, called for a federal union between the two nations, with joint organs of defence, foreign, financial and economic policies, a common citizenship and a single War Cabinet.

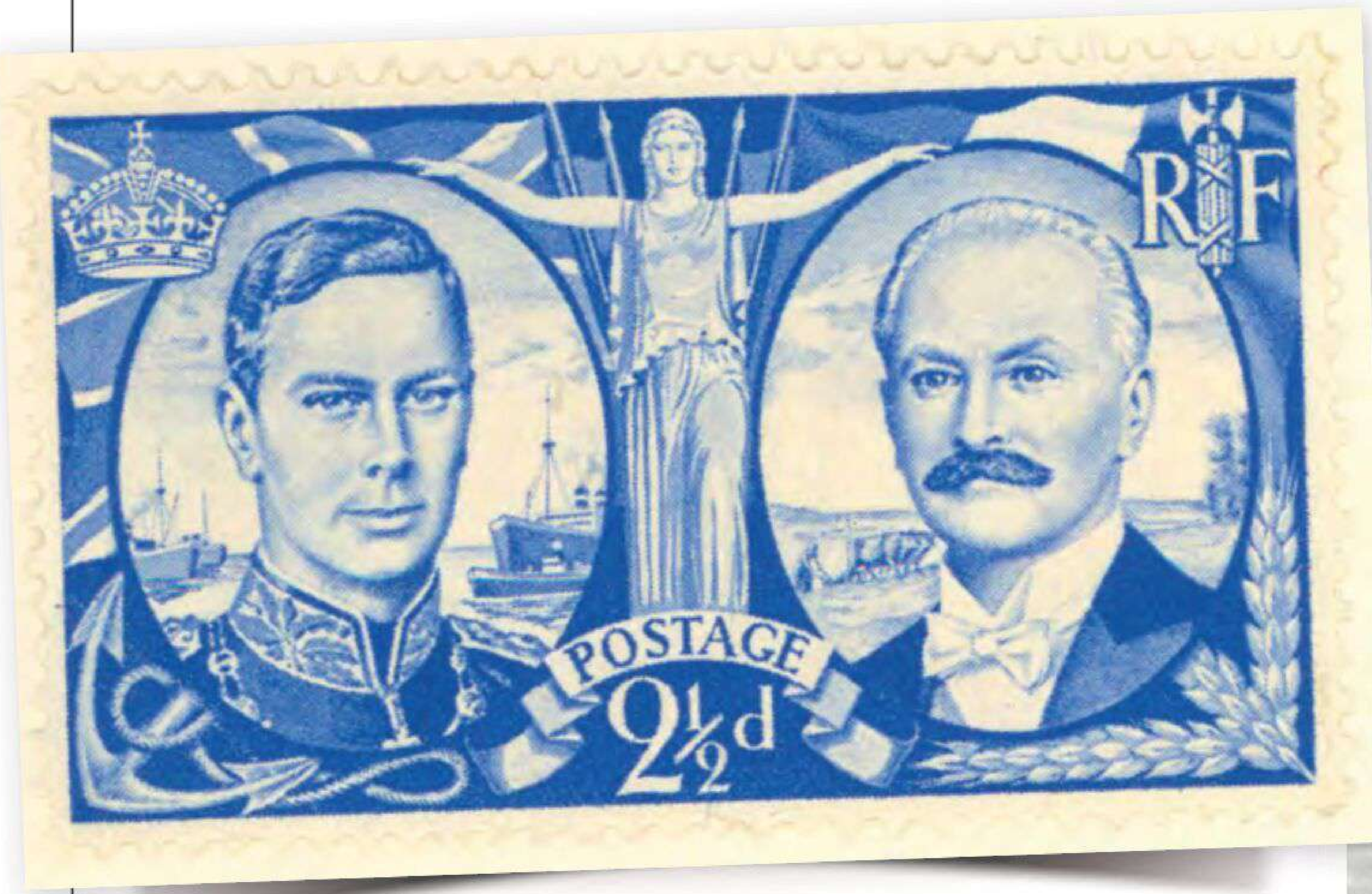
For a few tantalising hours on June 16, Churchill and Reynaud desperately tried to persuade their respective administrations to accept the union. The British Cabinet agreed and that afternoon Brigadier-General Charles de Gaulle, a junior defence minister who was in London at the time, rang France with further details of the offer. To secure the arrangement it was even suggested that the new country would be led by Reynard – Britain would have had its first French Prime Minister.

As France's ability to resist crumbled even further, that same evening the proposal was discussed by the French council of ministers. The offer of union, however, was "contemptuously dismissed". Six hours later Reynaud resigned.

It was to Marshal Henri Pétain that the French President, Albert Lebrun, hastily turned in an effort to form a new government. Pétain's



The CBS war correspondent William L. Shirer (on the right on the bench) pictured at Compiègne reporting on the events of June 22, 1940. The building in the background held the railway carriage in which Marshal Foch accepted the German surrender on November 11, 1918. (Library of Congress)



If Britain and France were to become one nation, then a common postal service for both parts of the new country would have been essential. This design for an Anglo-French postage stamp was actually produced in 1940. The stamp shows the heads of King George and President Albert Lebrun, and the design was accepted by both the British Postmaster General, Major Tryon, and the French Minister of Posts, M. Jules Julien. (Courtesy of the British Postal Museum)

first significant move, on June 17, was to approach Hitler with a request for an armistice. That day the aging warrior announced in a broadcast to the French people that, "It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today that we must stop fighting".

In so doing, Pétain unilaterally terminated an agreement that had been signed between London and Paris on February 28, 1940 – this being a pact which prohibited either country from engaging in a separate peace arrangement with Germany without the consent of the other. Of the proposal for a union, Pétain declared that it would have been "like being married to a corpse". It was the end of a very short-lived, if improbable, dream.

On hearing the news of Pétain's appeal for an end to the fighting, Hitler immediately set about planning the final ignominious act in France's fall. The location for the signing of the Armistice would be, he declared, the same clearing in the Forêt de Compiègne north of Paris where Germany had surrendered to the Allies in November 1918. The ceremony would be held in the very same railway carriage.

The date set for the signing of the Armistice, which would not formally come into effect until June 25, was the 22nd. One of those present on that momentous Saturday was William Shirer, a reporter for American CBS News organisation. In his memoir, *Berlin Diary*, Shirer provided the following account:

"It is now three twenty-three p.m. and the Germans stride over to the armistice car. For a moment or two they stand in the sunlight outside the car, chatting. Then Hitler steps up into the car, followed by the others. We can see nicely through the car windows.

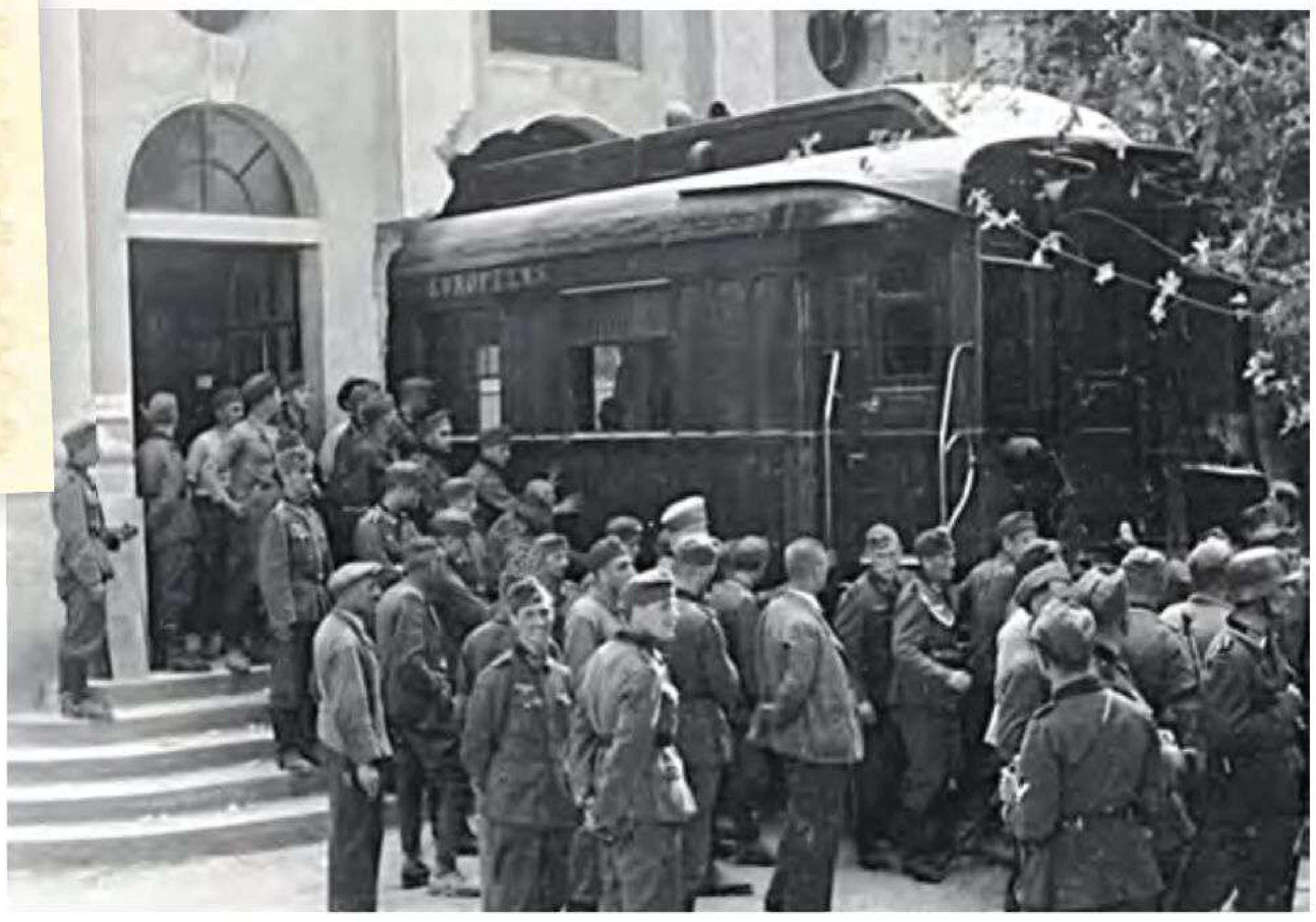
"Hitler takes the place occupied by Marshal Foch when the 1918 armistice terms were signed. The others spread themselves around him. Four chairs on the opposite side of the table from Hitler remain empty. The French have not yet appeared. But we do not wait long.

"Exactly at three thirty p.m. they alight from a car. They have flown up from Bordeaux to a near-by landing field... Then they walk down the avenue flanked by three German officers. We see them now as they come into the sunlight of the clearing…

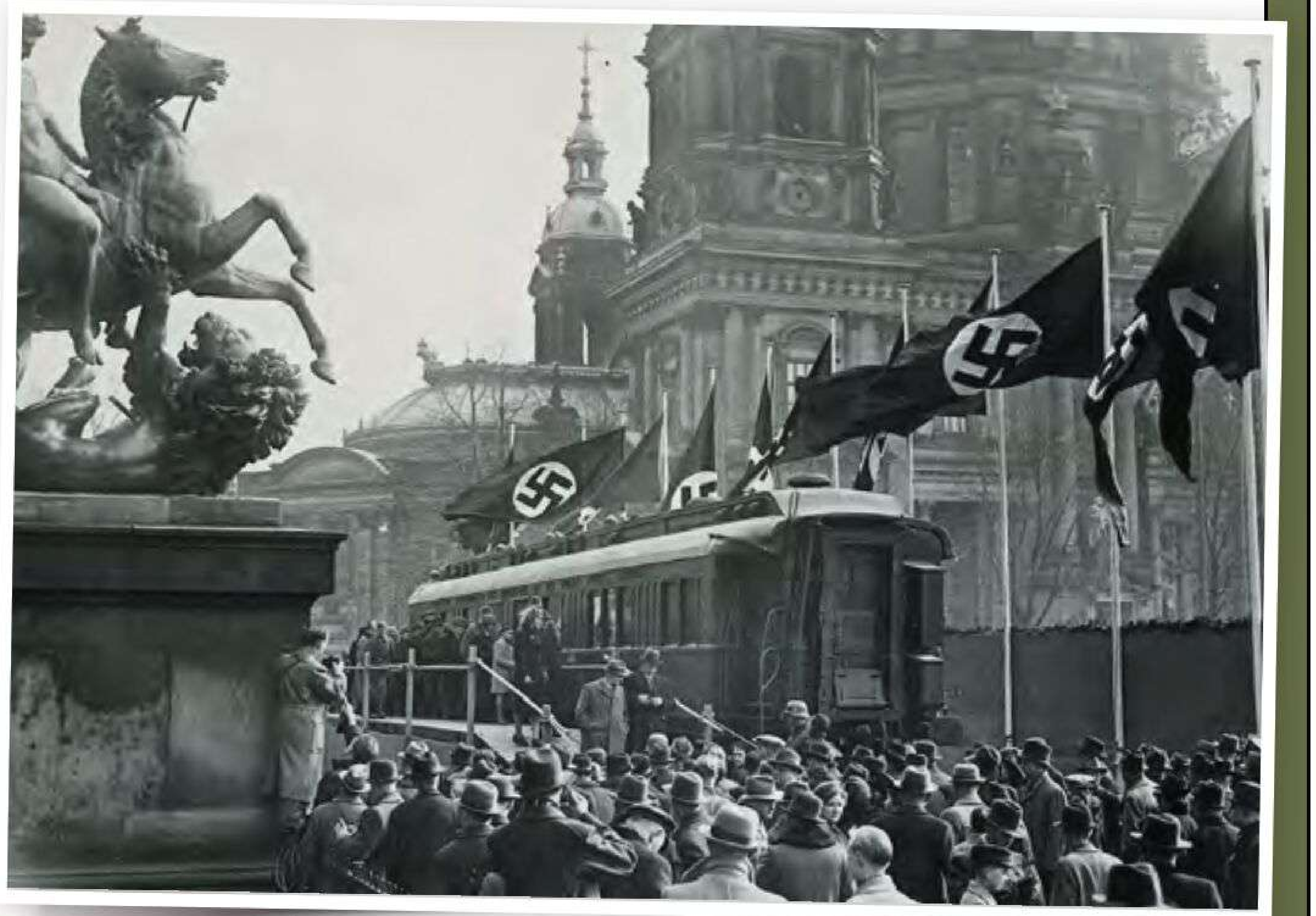
"It is a grave hour in the life of France. The Frenchmen keep their eyes straight ahead. Their faces are solemn, drawn. They are the picture of tragic dignity. They walk stiffly to the car, where they are met by two German officers… The Germans salute. The French salute. The atmosphere is what Europeans call "correct." There are salutes, but no handshakes…

"Hitler, as far as we can see through the windows, does not say a word to the French or to anybody else. He nods to General Keitel at his side. We see General Keitel adjusting his papers. Then he starts to read. He is reading the preamble to the German armistice terms. The French sit there with marble-like faces and listen intently. Hitler and Goring glance at the green table-top.

"The reading of the preamble lasts but a few minutes. Hitler, we soon observe, has no intention of remaining very long, of listening to the reading of the armistice terms themselves. At three forty-two p.m., twelve minutes after the French arrive, we see Hitler stand up, salute stiffly, and then stride out of the drawing-room, followed by Goring, Brauchitsch, Raeder, Hess, and Ribbentrop. The French, like figures of stone, remain at the green-topped table. General Keitel remains with them. He starts to read them the detailed conditions of the armistice."



The Armistice wagon being removed from its hall, on the orders of Hitler, prior to the official signing of the French surrender two days later. (Historic Military Press)



Following France's surrender, Hitler had the Armistice carriage placed on public display in Berlin. It is generally stated that the carriage was destroyed by the SS in 1945. (Danish National Archives)

CHANNEL ISLANDS ATTACKED

The immediate aftermath of the Luftwaffe attacks on Jersey and Guernsey on June 28, 1940, as viewed from *Glategny* Esplanade. The smoke seen here is coming from White Rock in St Peter Port, Guernsey. (Courtesy of Norman Grutt, via Simon Hamon)

Located a short distance from the Normandy coast, the French surrender meant that the Channel Islands found themselves in a desperate situation. R C F Maugham, who lived on Jersey at that time, recalled how the "anxious Jersey people and the equally disquieted residents, awaited with unconcealed misgivings what the future might hold for them".

Facing the inevitable, the British government took the decision to demilitarise the islands. On June 24, the Bailiffs of Jersey and Guernsey received a message from King George VI: "For strategic reasons it has been found necessary to withdraw the Armed Forces from the Channel Islands. I deeply regret this necessity…"

Seemingly abandoned by the British Government, which promptly began evacuating as many military and civilian personnel as possible, the remaining Channel Islanders, ridden with uncertainty and fear, awaited the next step in the unfolding drama of the German Blitzkrieg. That came at 18.45 hours on the evening of June 28 when a gaggle of Heinkel He 111 bombers appeared over the harbours of both St Helier, on Jersey, and St Peter Port, on Guernsey, dropping bombs and machine-gunning as they went.

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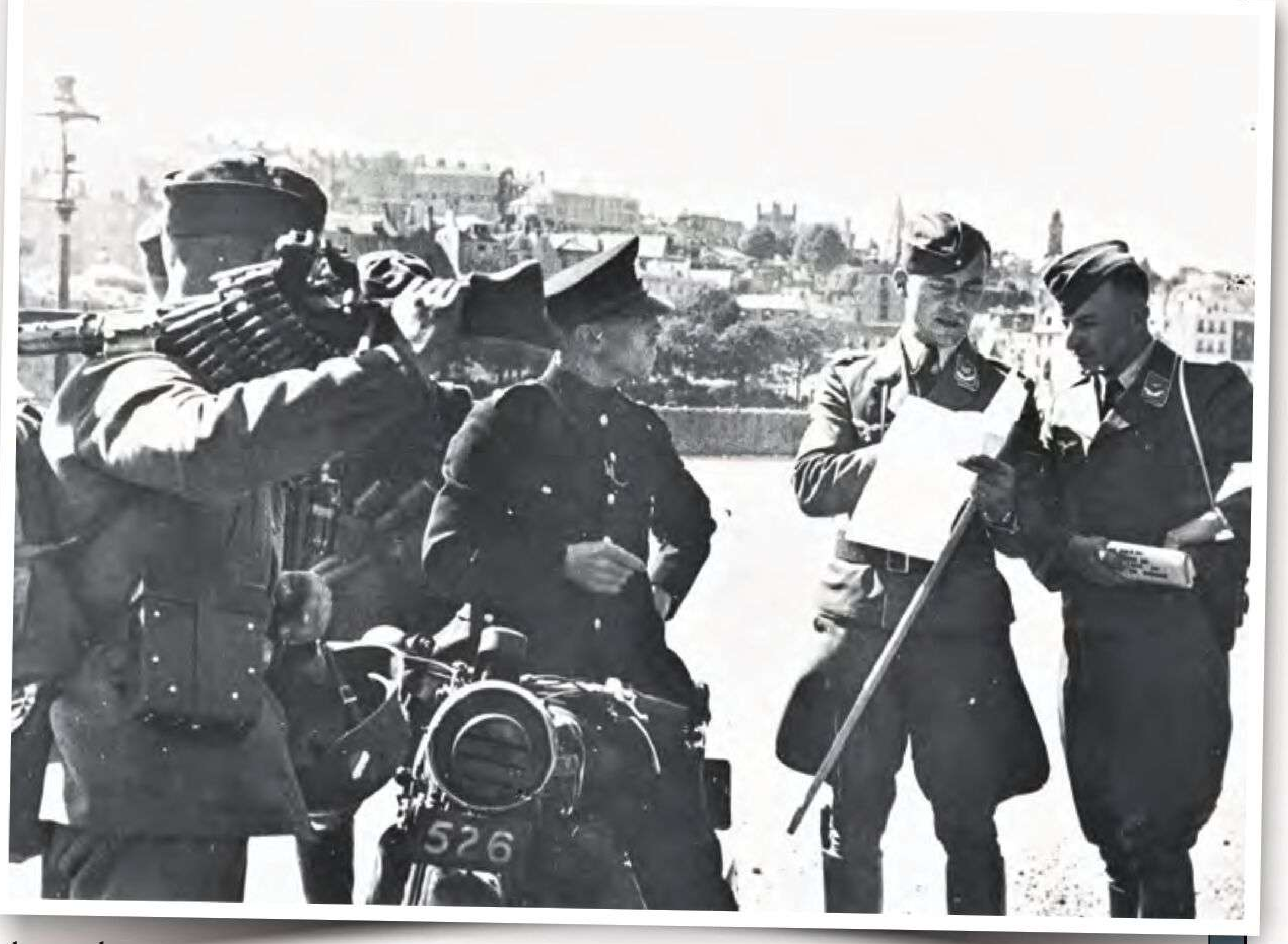
The clean-up after the bombing of June 28 pictured underway in St Peter Port. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

The mailboat *Isle of Sark* was docked in St Peter Port embarking evacuees when the raiders struck. Onboard was Mrs R J Stephen: "There was a terrific explosion as the first bomb fell, splinters rattled on to the deck and a man standing next to my small boy sagged on to the deck with blood pouring from a wound in the groin… some ran to get below, but others less lucky, chose to panic down the gangway plank and make for the sheds and warehouses on the wharf. They were caught by a raking machine gun fire from the second and third Nazi planes and went down in rows like ninepins."

As six of the nine German bombers had set about attacking Guernsey, the remaining three Heinkels continued on towards Jersey. Moments later they appeared over St Helier, where scenes similar to those experienced in St Peter Port were played out.

Dr Averell Darling was on duty in Jersey's General Hospital: "I looked out of the window and saw three Heinkel bombers. As I watched I saw bombs beginning to fall. I… went through the hospital down to Casualty. And almost as I got there the first victim arrived. He had a great hole blown in the side of his chest and he died within a matter of moments. Fifty per cent of those who were admitted to the hospital and who died were killed by bombs. The other half died from machine gun bullets."

The raids left 10 dead on Jersey alone. Hoping to prevent further loss of life, the United States Ambassador in London, Joseph P Kennedy, was asked to pass a message to the German Government: "The evacuation of all military personnel and equipment from the Channel Islands was completed some days ago. The Islands are therefore demilitarized and cannot be considered in any way as a legitimate target for bombardment."



One of Guernsey's police officers is pictured assisting Luftwaffe personnel with directions. The latter are busy posting the first orders of the German Commandant around St Peter Port. The three men on the left of the image are a machine-gun crew on their way to take up defensive positions at Castle Cornet, from where they guarded the entrance to the harbour. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

In the 48 hours after the German bombing, the last lucky few who could do so left the Channel Islands. The fate of those who remained was sealed on June 30, when the Kriegsmarine's naval commander in Northern France held a conference in Paris to discuss the next steps for the islands. During the course of this conference it was finally learnt that the Channel Islands had been de-militarised. Plans were then laid for a swift implementation Operation *Grüne Pfeile* ('Green Arrow').

As was to be expected, the occupation of the Channel Islands by Hitler's forces was to be a grand propaganda exercise. As part of this scheme, the men of Naval Assault Group *Gotenhafen* prepared to board the craft from which they would storm ashore to capture their first piece of the British Isles. As things turned out, they were beaten to it by a few bold crews of the Luftwaffe's 3.(F)/123. One of the unit's airmen, Oberfeldwebel Roman Gastager, later described how he was the first enemy serviceman to set foot on the Channel Islands:

"On the 30th June 1940 at 12:53 I started on my first enemy flight… Together with two other planes we headed for Guernsey. We had no idea whether the English were still there or whether they had already retreated. We flew straight to the airfield and were relieved to see cows grazing there as that meant there were no mines. We flew at low altitude to disperse the cows and was the first plane to land. We rolled towards the hangars. I jumped out, released the safety catch of my machine gun and held it in position. The others remained in the aircraft. Luckily the airfield appeared to be deserted."

With RAF aircraft approaching, Gastager and his colleagues took off and returned to their French base. The Luftwaffe, however, returned a couple of hours later. This time they stayed.

It was not long before Guernsey's Attorney General, Ambrose Sherwill, experienced his first encounter with one of the initial German invaders. It was about 19.30 hours when "a young German Luftwaffe officer, still in flying kit and driven by our Police Sergeant Harper, arrived at my house", he recalled. "He spoke English. Now, because of the bombing on the Friday, my wife and I had put our two small boys to sleep in the hall of our house. We imagined that the arches were of solid granite… I went out by the side door and intercepted him and said: 'Will you please come in by the side door?' Instantly suspicious, he said: 'And why?' I told him our young children were asleep in the front hall and he said, 'I would not dream of disturbing your children'."

In the hours and days that followed, the German occupiers began the process of asserting their control of Guernsey, installing their own administration, landing further military personnel and introducing their own rules and regulations. There was also, of course, the question of the other Channel Islands.

GUERNSEY CAPTURED

Invading German troops pictured shortly after their arrival, by air, on Guernsey on July 1, 1940. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

JERSEY SURRENDERED

With the occupation of Guernsey progressing in an orderly fashion, and having met the Bailiff and other States dignitaries to begin the process of consolidating command of the island, the Military Commandant designate, Major Lanz, returned to the airport. "There was," he wrote, "still a point that we were not satisfied with. There lay about sixteen miles to the south, the Isle of Jersey, almost twice as big. That we also wished to have."

Earlier, in the small hours of July 1, three copies of an ultimatum signed by General Richthofen, the Luftwaffe commander in Normandy, had been dropped on Jersey. Each copy had been released in a stout canvas bag to which was attached a number of long red streamers. One of the bags fell at the airport and was immediately taken to the island's Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche, by the airfield's controller, Charles Roche.

It was at this point that a problem presented itself. "We could, at first, find nobody capable of translating it," remembered Coutanche. "It evidently contained instructions and we were able to make out, by certain words, that unpleasant things would happen if they were not complied with. It was obviously imperative to know quickly what the instructions were."

A picture of early German occupation troops outside the Hotel Ommaroo in St Helier, Jersey. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

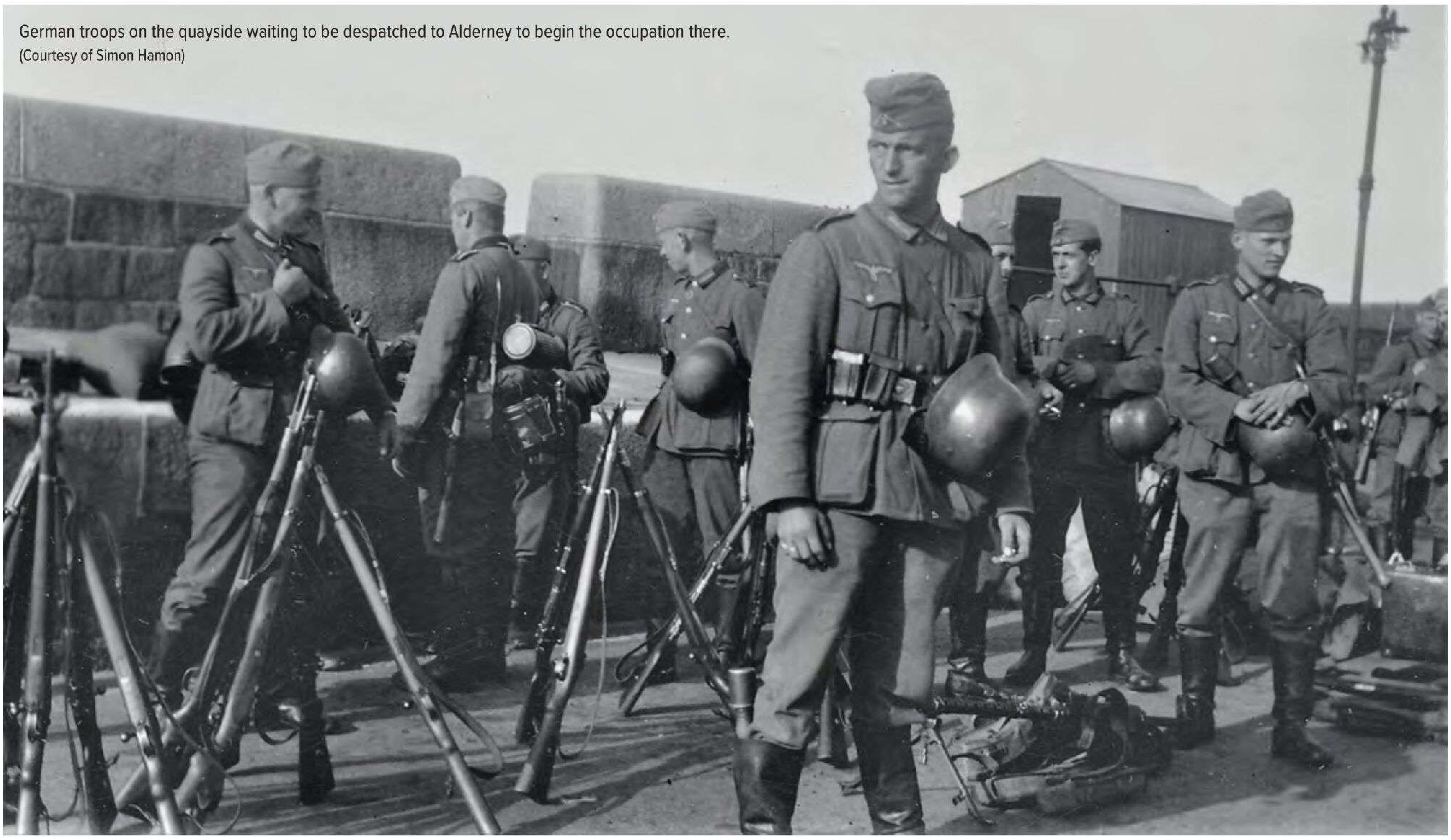
Eventually, after much searching, a resident who spoke German was tracked down. Finally able to understand exactly what was required of them, the islanders set about preparing for the imminent arrival of the invaders.

As Coutanche later noted, that moment was not long in coming. On the afternoon of July 1, he was in his office when the telephone rang. The person on the other end of the line was Roche, who reported thus: "A German plane landed a few minutes ago and taxied up to the apron. I went out and spoke to the pilot. He said that he was aware of the orders instructing Jersey to display the white flag as a sign of surrender, and that he could see that white flags were being shown all over the Island. Might he take it that the Island was going to be surrendered without any fuss? If so, he would go back and tell his chiefs. I told him that he was correct, and he has flown off."

Soon after, the first of a number of Junkers Ju 52 transports began landing in Jersey. One of the passengers was Major Lanz. He later remembered the short ceremony that then took place: "With arms at the slope and eyes right, over the airfield rang the command 'Hoist Flag!' Slowly, and ceremonially, over this British territory also, for the first time in history, rose the German Imperial War Flag high upon the mast. Now Jersey too was under German over-lordship."

For virtually every islander, the surrender was a bitter pill to swallow. "I shall never forget the sight of those white flags hanging from every house," recalled Margaret Vaudin. "It was both sickening and demoralising, and I never felt more depressed in my life."

German troops preparing for their part in Operation *Green Arrow* are pictured at the recently captured airfield at Cherbourg, July 1, 1940. The men seen here, from the 396th Infantry Regiment, part of the 216th Infantry Division, would soon be airlifted to the Channel Islands. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)



German troops on the quayside waiting to be despatched to Alderney to begin the occupation there. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

THE GERMANS ARRIVE ON ALDERNEY

Though the two main Channel Islands were now in German hands, there were still six other inhabited islands in the British archipelago that needed to be dealt with. The next in line for Major Lanz's attention was Alderney, although it was, by this stage of the war, virtually abandoned.

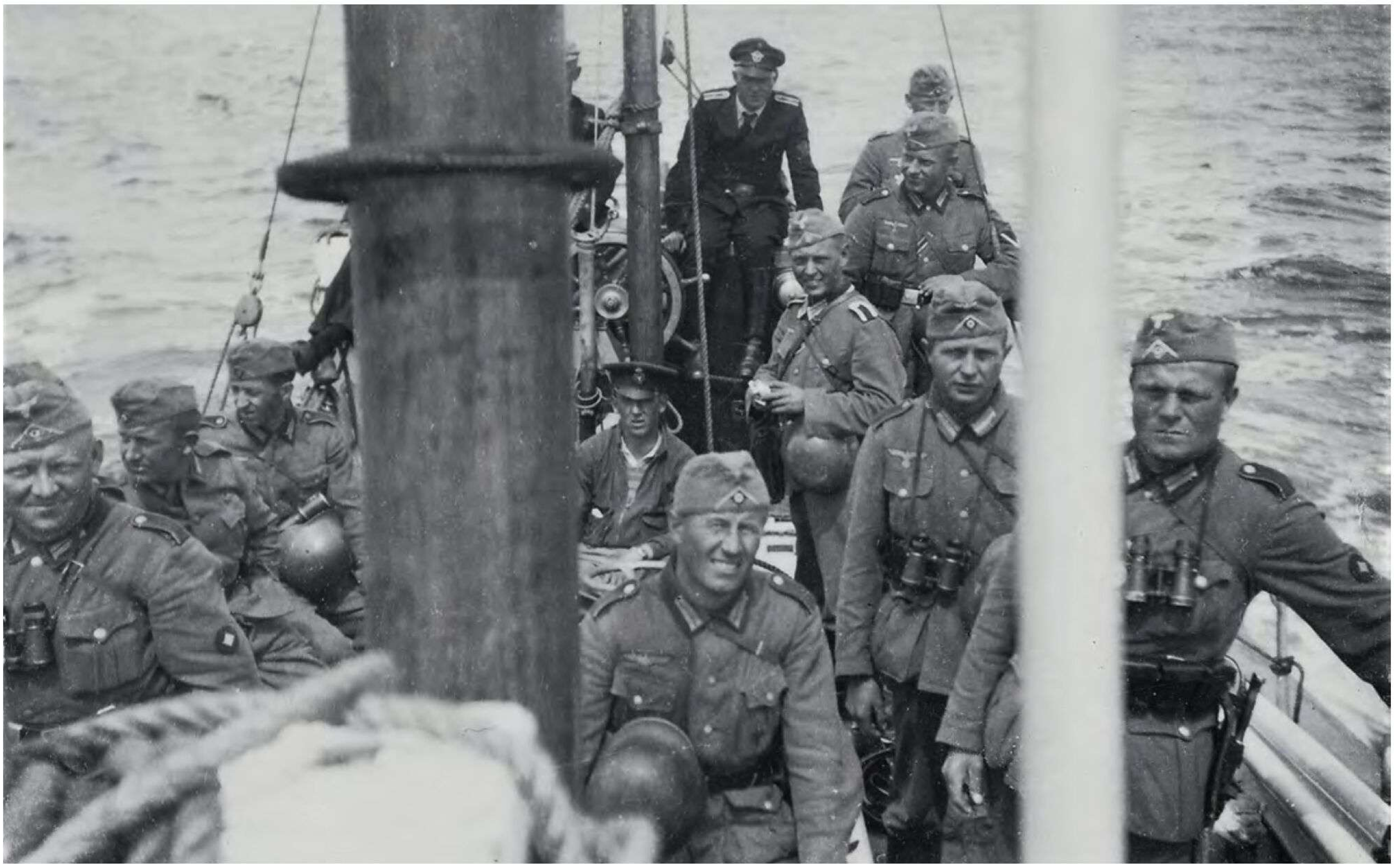
At about the same time that the German forces were dealing with Jersey, they had also been eyeing the virtually abandoned Alderney. The following is the text of an intercepted and decoded message that had been sent by Luftflotte 3 at 15.15 hours on July 1: "Flieger Korps VIII: 2 Do.17 of 2.(F) 123 (take off 04.00hrs) for Alderney and Jersey, to drop messages onto the airfields there with the request that the islands by 2 July 40 07.00hrs, are handed over unconditionally. About 11.00hrs repeated flight, close by, it became apparent that Alderney was uninhabited, the airfield blocked with wire obstacles and was not approachable. In Jersey, the Governor handed over the island unconditionally."

The first German troops to have arrived on Alderney are pictured having taken up residence in their headquarters on the Island, which was established in the Island Hall in Connaught Square, St Anne's. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

The first German personnel arrived on Alderney by air, travelling in examples of the nimble and versatile Fieseler Fi 156 Storch liaison aircraft, on July 2. Among those early visitors who made the journey to Alderney was the ever-present Major Lanz. "Acting on the orders of the GOC," he later explained, "I explored the island": "After many twists and turns Lt Rudolf who was himself flying the machine made a good landing on the airfield at Alderney. I found there a few members of Flieger Korps VIII fetching food.

"The island had been evacuated by the civilian population and many cattle had died for want of water. The last Guernsey people who fetched part of the cattle to Guernsey, made use of the opportunity to loot the shops. After a brief examination and report the order came to [fully] occupy Alderney also. One half of the occupying force went the same day by air in two Jus [Junkers Ju 52 transports]; the other half was sent over by boat."

Mirroring events on Guernsey, and virtually simultaneously on Jersey, the first enemy arrivals on Alderney, perhaps the Luftwaffe personnel described by Lanz, were quickly bolstered by additional resources, as the authors M. St. J. Packe and Maurice Dreyfus reveal in their book *The Alderney Story 1939/49*: "[They were] reinforced at once by seaborne force from Cherbourg. It was not, at first, an impressive garrison, only eighty men all told, commanded by Sergeant Major Schmidt. On the other hand, since there were only seven inhabitants, all of whom kept strictly recluse, and since all the animals were dead or gone (except for an increasing plague of rabbits)… there was little for the garrison to do. The German Customs Officers who had hopefully been included in their number found small scope, in the way of contraband, to engage their vigilance, as they moodily surveyed the empty sea and sky, and listened to the everlasting wind."



An early shot of German troops en route to occupy Sark. (Courtesy of Simon Hamon)

GERMAN TROOPS ASHORE ON SARK

These men formed part of the first German force to occupy Sark. The NCO in charge of this group was Gefrieter Obenauf, who can be seen in the centre of the back row. The building in the background is the Bel Air Hotel which stood at the top of Harbour Hill. (Courtesy of Mrs Carre, via Simon Hamon)

Though part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey, Sark, with a population of just a few hundred and little more than two square miles in extent, has always been fiercely independent. As the situation deteriorated throughout 1940, most, if not all, of the 471 Sarkese opted to remain on the island. This was due, in no small measure to Dame Sibyl Hathaway, the hereditary, feudal ruler of the Island of Sark, as Ambrose Sherwill explained: "In Sark, under the leadership of La Dame, calm reigned. We had offered them a ship to bring away those wishing to leave. Our offer was declined."

Untouched by the air raids on June 28, there was little that Sark's residents could do except to keep calm and await the next development. That came on 3 July, when Dame Hathaway was informed that a boat was heading towards the island.

From the top of La Seigneurie, she saw that it was the old Guernsey lifeboat that was crossing the waters of the Great Russel. She correctly concluded that it carried German emissaries. Dame Hathaway immediately telephoned Mr William Carré, the Sénéschal (or Judge), asking him to go and meet the Germans at the harbour to conduct them up the hill to La Seigneurie.

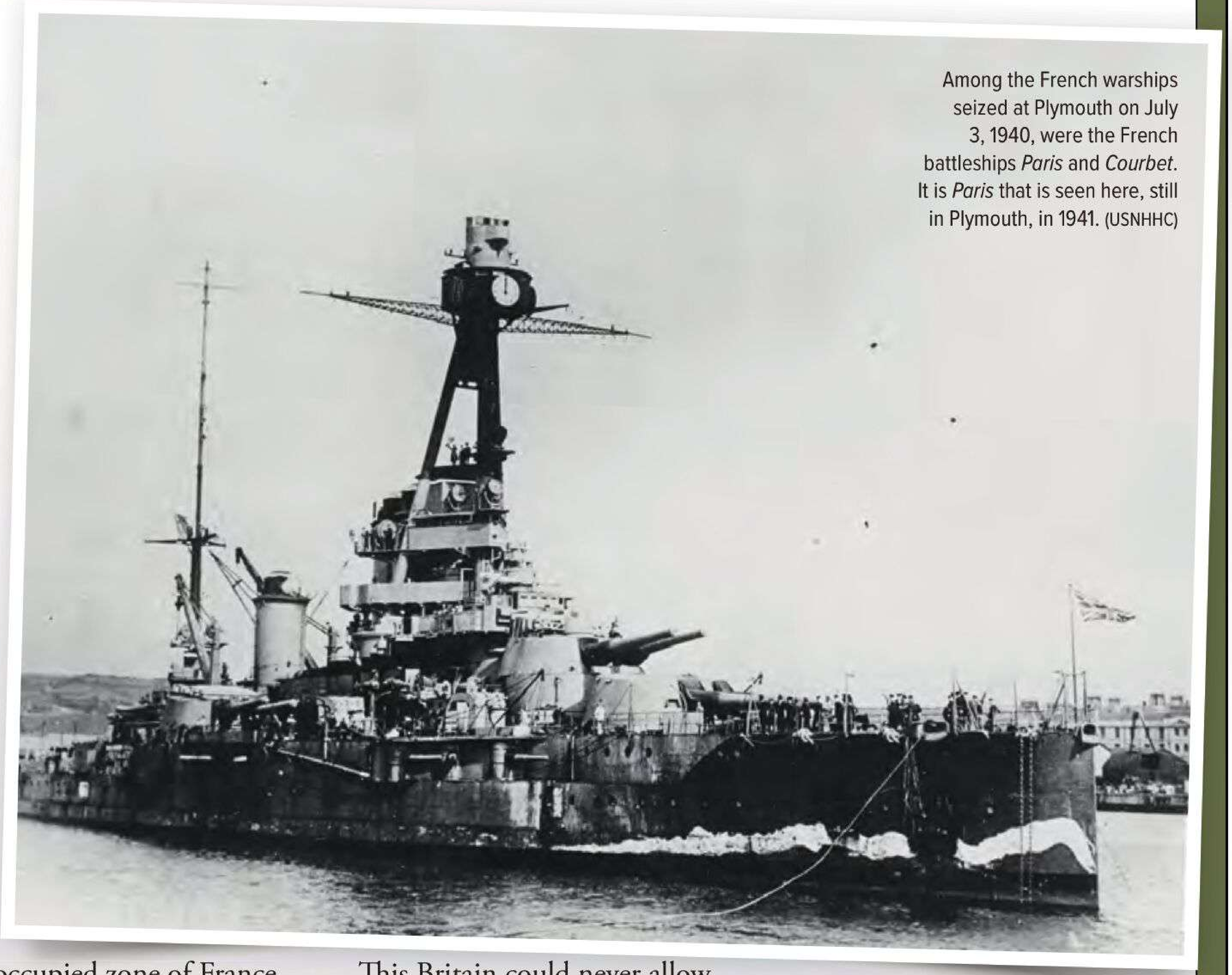
As she waited, Dame Hathaway discussed with her husband the most suitable way in which to receive the invaders. "We wanted to show the Germans that we were rulers," she later told one of the islanders. "We scored a point," she mused, after all "it was we who were receiving the Germans. They were not receiving us."

The Dame eventually decided the steps she would take: "We'll put two chairs behind the desk at the far end of the drawing-room. It is a long room and they'll have to walk the whole length of it, which will give us a certain advantage… Besides, they'll have to walk up those few stairs from the hall and then turn right before they are announced, and that will also help us to look more impressive."

In time William Carré walked to the harbour to carry out a task never before performed by a Sénéschal in Sark's long history – that of meeting an invader with orders to offer no resistance. Predictably, one of the officers on the boat was Major Lanz. Having been conducted to Dame Hathaway's office, during the subsequent discussions she pointed out to Lanz that Sark was a self-governing territory. Lanz suddenly found himself in some doubt whether or not Germany was actually at war with Sark; he later sent a letter to the Reich Foreign Office for confirmation.

The following day, 10 German troops, led by Unteroffizier Hans Hamm, came ashore on Sark, as Michael Marshall recalled: "Shouting raucously at his ten infantrymen, [Hamm] came ashore, marched up Harbour Hill and installed his contingent in the comfortable Bel Air Hotel. Soon they commandeered a flagpole which they fastened to the railings outside the hotel. The swastika was run-up."

OPERATION CATAPULT



Among the French warships seized at Plymouth on July 3, 1940, were the French battleships *Paris* and *Courbet*. It is *Paris* that is seen here, still in Plymouth, in 1941. (USNHHC)

For France, the war was over. Her army beaten and her air force smashed, she had formally signed an Armistice on June 22, 1940. But her navy, the fourth largest in the world, remained relatively intact.

At the outbreak of the war, France had possessed eight battleships, with another, *Jean Bart*, being launched in 1940, as well as 19 cruisers, two aircraft carriers, 71 destroyers, 76 submarines and more than 200 smaller craft – a total of around 400 vessels. With some justification, many in the British Government and at the Admiralty were concerned at what might happen to such a formidable force. Should these warships fall into the hands of the Germans, Britain's very survival as a free nation would be in the gravest peril.

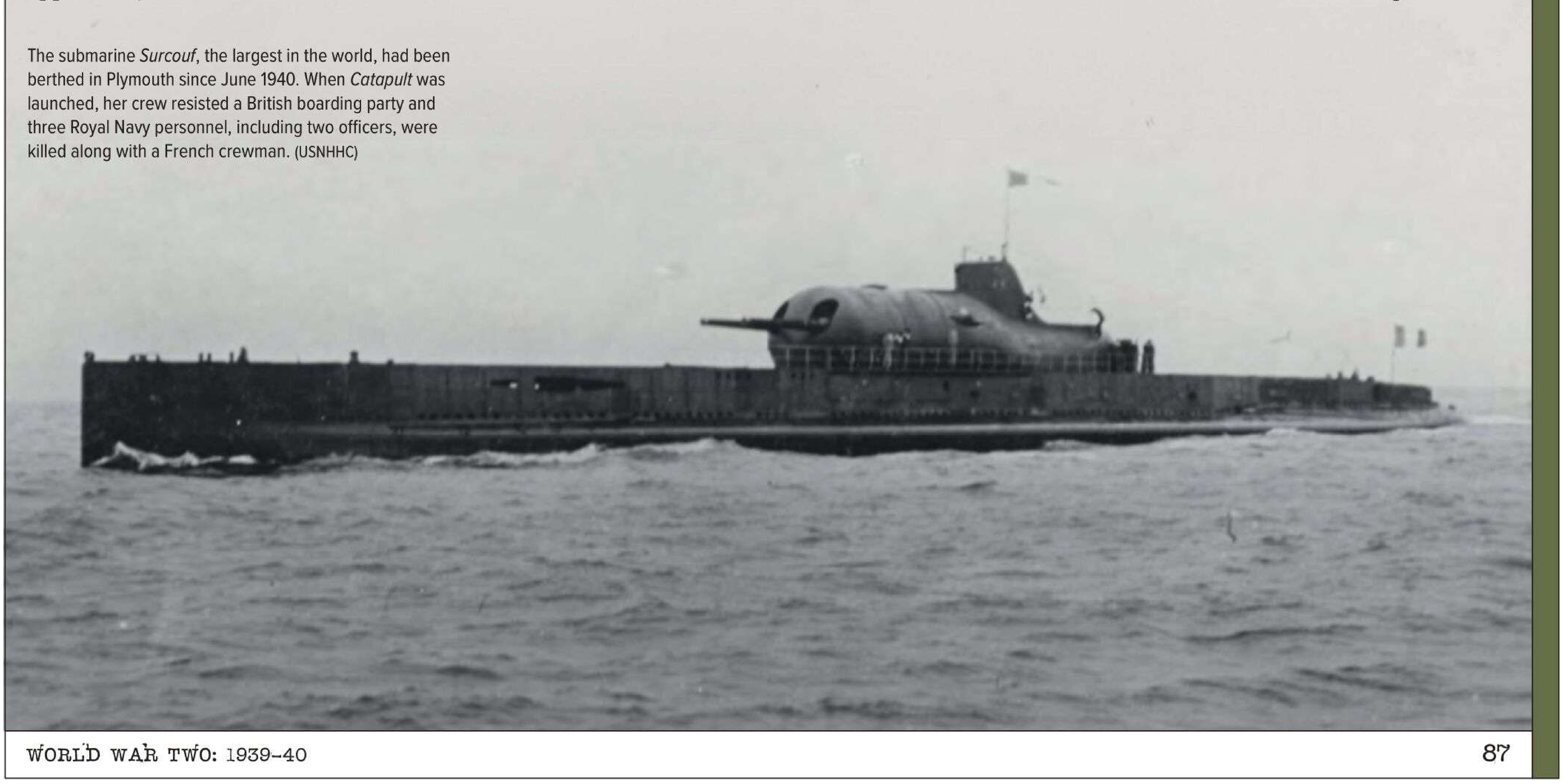
As part of the Armistice, Hitler, realizing that if France was pushed too far she might opt to fight on from her colonies, had specified that the French fleet be disarmed but not surrendered. All that Hitler asked of Admiral Darlan, therefore, was that his ships should be demilitarised under German "control". However, acting on secret instructions issued by Darlan, those vessels in harbours which were within the new German-occupied zone of France sailed to ports in North Africa or elsewhere, except for those that were unfit to put to sea, which were scuttled. The harbour installations were then blown up. The French navy had clearly demonstrated that it would not permit its ships to fall into the hands of the Germans – precisely as Darlan had promised the British.

This should have been enough for Churchill to conclude that the French fleet did not present any threat to Britain. With a little careful diplomacy, it might have been likely that the French squadrons would have allied themselves once again with the Royal Navy. At worst, they would have remained in North Africa well beyond Hitler's immediate reach. But the terms of the Armistice were far too vague for Churchill and the Admiralty. Furthermore, they did not trust Hitler. They believed that the Germans would simply take the ships when a suitable opportunity arose and then re-arm them.

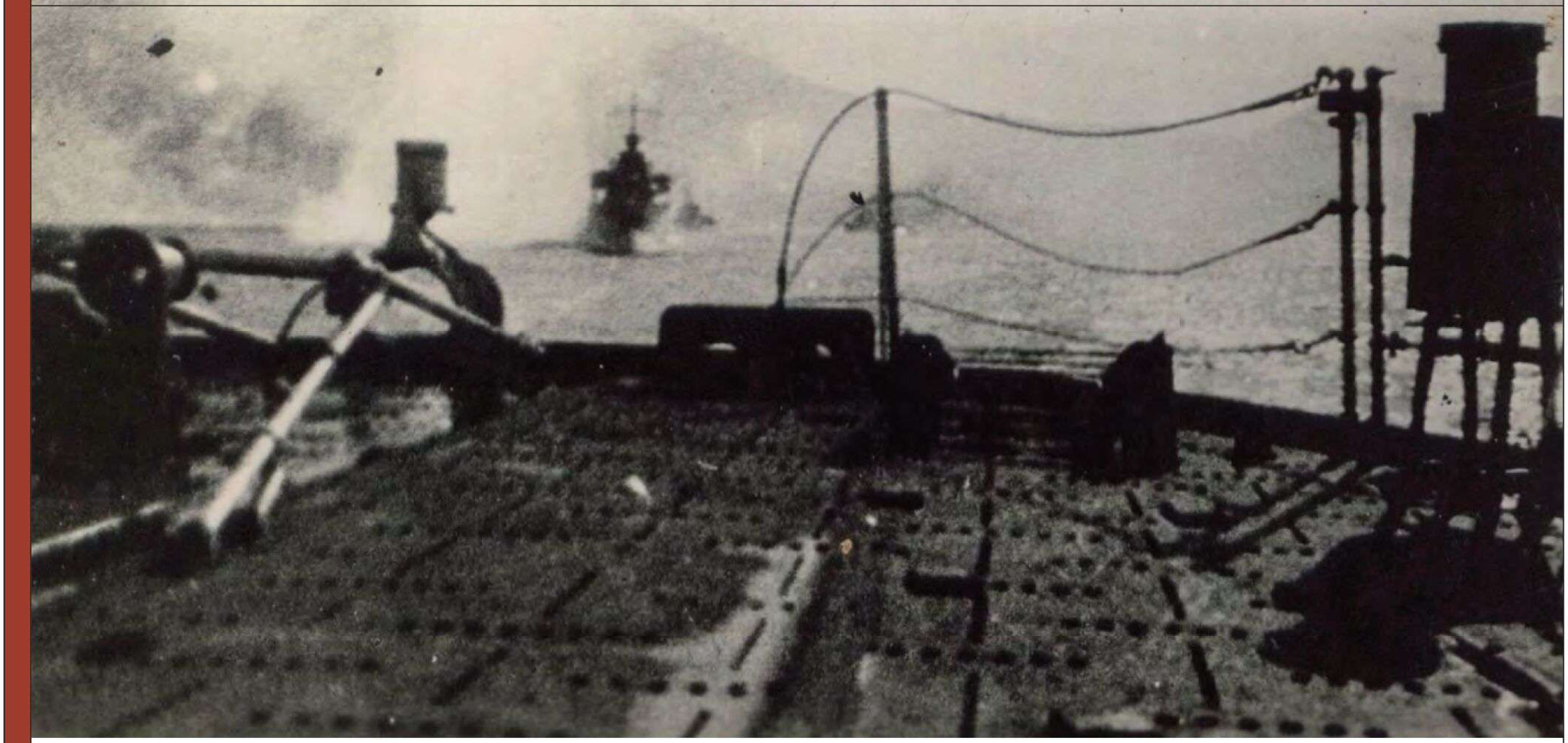
This Britain could never allow. Consequently, the War Cabinet decided to mount an operation to neutralise the French fleet. Operation *Catapult* swung into action on July 3, 1940. All of the French warships in British ports, almost of all of which had sailed to the UK of their own volition, were taken by force and their crews were marched off to detention camps. In Portsmouth and Plymouth, for example, Royal Navy boarding parties seized two French battleships, two light cruisers, a number of submarines, eight destroyers and some 200 smaller, but extremely useful, mine-sweepers and anti-submarine vessels. At Alexandria in Egypt, where British and French squadrons were anchored together, another battleship, a further four cruisers, and other vessels were taken peacefully after sensible negotiations by the respective admirals.

The last remaining act was to neutralise a strong French force that had anchored at the naval base at Mers-el-Kébir in Oran, Algeria.

The submarine *Surcouf*, the largest in the world, had been berthed in Plymouth since June 1940. When *Catapult* was launched, her crew resisted a British boarding party and three Royal Navy personnel, including two officers, were killed along with a French crewman. (USNHHC)



"THE BIGGEST POLITICAL BLUNDER"

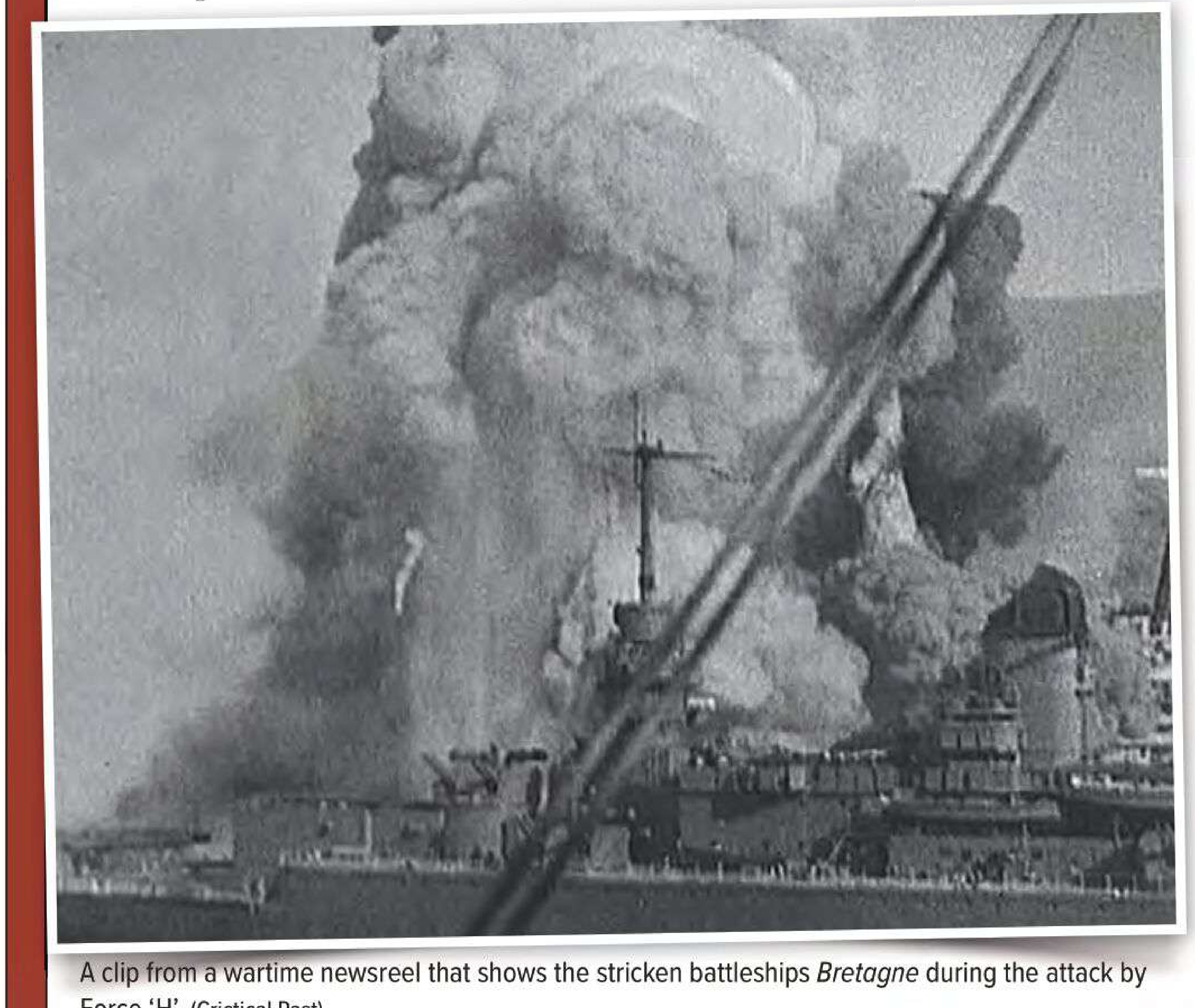


Shells exploding among the French warships at Mers-el-Kébir. Pictured from the deck of the destroyer *Volta* is, next in line, another destroyer, *Le Terrible*. (Courtesy of Jacques Mulard)

The task of confronting the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir was handed to Admiral James Somerville and the Gibraltar squadron, Force 'H'. This squadron consisted of the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the battleships *Hood*, *Valiant* and *Resolution* and the cruisers *Arethusa* and *Enterprise*, all of which were accompanied by 11 destroyers.

Somerville's instructions from the Admiralty were that the French should be presented with the following alternatives: 1) to take their ships to British harbours and fight with the Royal Navy; 2) to steam their ships to a British port; 3) immediately demilitarise their ships under British scrutiny; or 4) scuttle their ships.

On his arrival at Gibraltar, Somerville called together all the flag officers under his command, as well as Admiral Dudley North, the naval commander on the Rock. North had already visited his French counterpart at Mers-el-Kébir, Admiral Marcel Gensoul, to discuss the situation. Gensoul had assured North that "in spirit" the French were on Britain's side and that force was to be avoided at all costs. This view was supported by all present at the conference, particularly those officers that had been until recently working with the French as liaison officers.



A clip from a wartime newsreel that shows the stricken battleships *Bretagne* during the attack by Force 'H'. (Crictical Past)

Somerville was impressed by the arguments and the unanimity of opinion of his officers and he cabled London advising the Admiralty that he believed that force, or even the threat of force, should not be used against their former allies. Churchill, however, would not be swayed. Immediate and drastic action, Somerville was informed, was essential.

Force 'H' duly arrived off Mers-el-Kébir on the morning of July 3. Somerville sent Captain Holland of *Ark Royal* to present the British demands in person. Holland spoke French fluently and knew most of the French admirals, including Gensoul. At the same time, the British ships had been spotted, Gensoul immediately ordering his own captains to "Prepare for action".

As the minutes ticked by, both sides tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the situation. Neither, however, was prepared to back down. French reinforcements had also put to sea and were heading for Mers-el-Kébir. At 16.46 hours, the Admiralty instructed Somerville to "Settle matters quickly".

When a final British deadline expired, Holland left *Dunkerque* at 17.25 hours. Five minutes later the guns of Force 'H' roared into life.

The first salvo slammed into *Bretagne*, which was torn apart by a sheet of flame as the battleship exploded, covering the harbour in a pall of smoke. Almost 1,000 men of her crew were killed.

As the shells continued to fall on the French warships, Gensoul flashed desperate signals from the shore appealing to Somerville to stop the slaughter. At 18.10 hours the British guns ceased fire. The battleship *Provence* and battlecruiser *Dunkerque* were among the warships damaged, as was a destroyer. In total, 1,297 French sailors were killed.

Churchill later wrote that Mers-el-Kébir had been "the most hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned". Somerville bluntly described the attack as "the biggest political blunder of modern times".

A trio of Messerschmitt Bf 109s pictured in flight over the English Channel in the summer of 1940. (Danish National Archives)

Against all expectations, the British Expeditionary Force had been brought home, though minus almost all of its equipment. In the days that followed France had collapsed, forcing its new government to sign an armistice. Hitler's forces were perched on the coast of northern France. Apart from the heightened menace that this created to Britain's seaborne and the threat of imminent invasion, there was the harsh fact that the world's largest air force at that time was within an hour's flight of much of southern England.

Churchill, acutely aware of the predicament the nation found itself in, opted to give a rousing speech in the House of Commons on June 18. "What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over," he declared. "I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin… The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war.

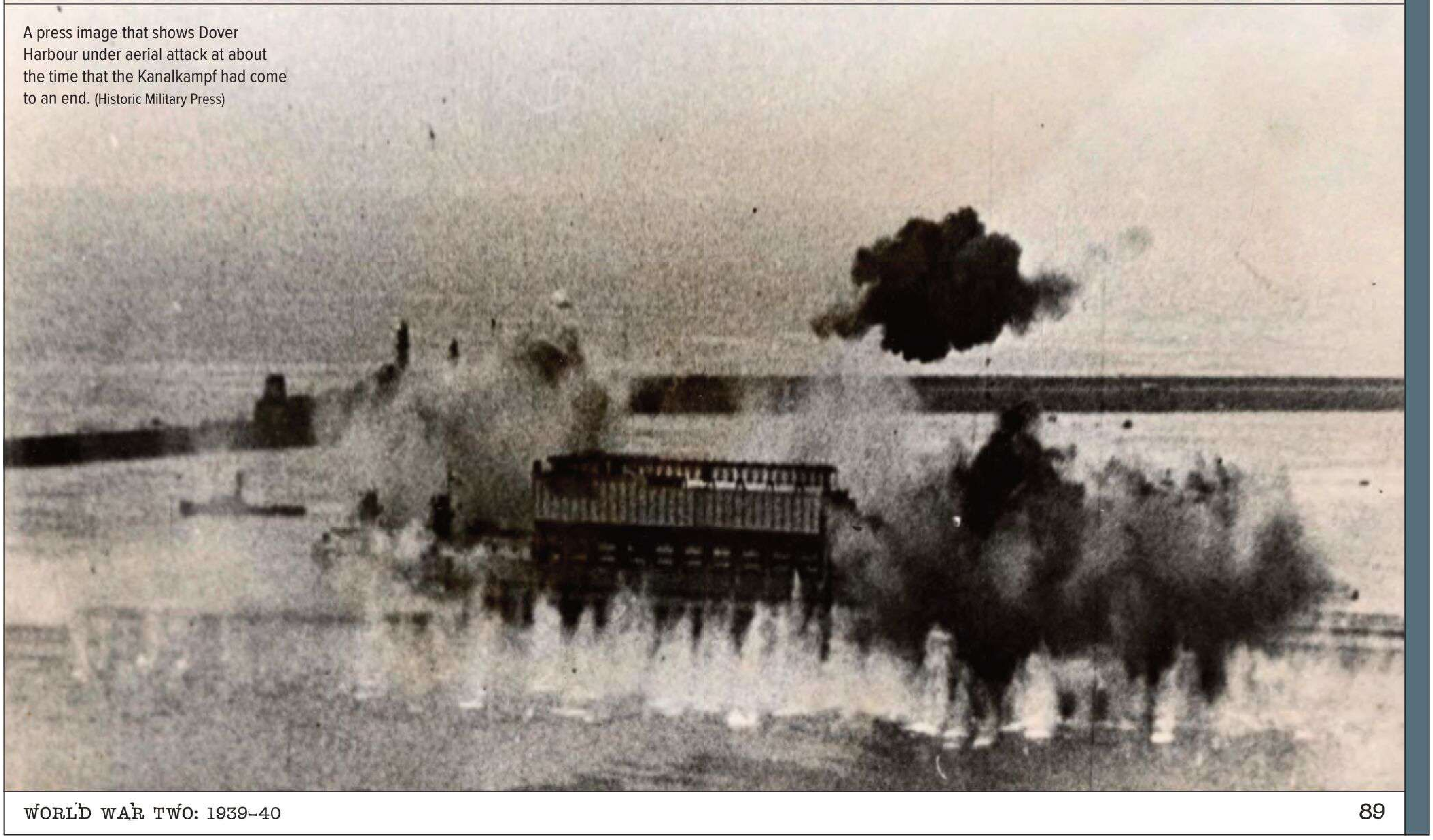
"If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour'."

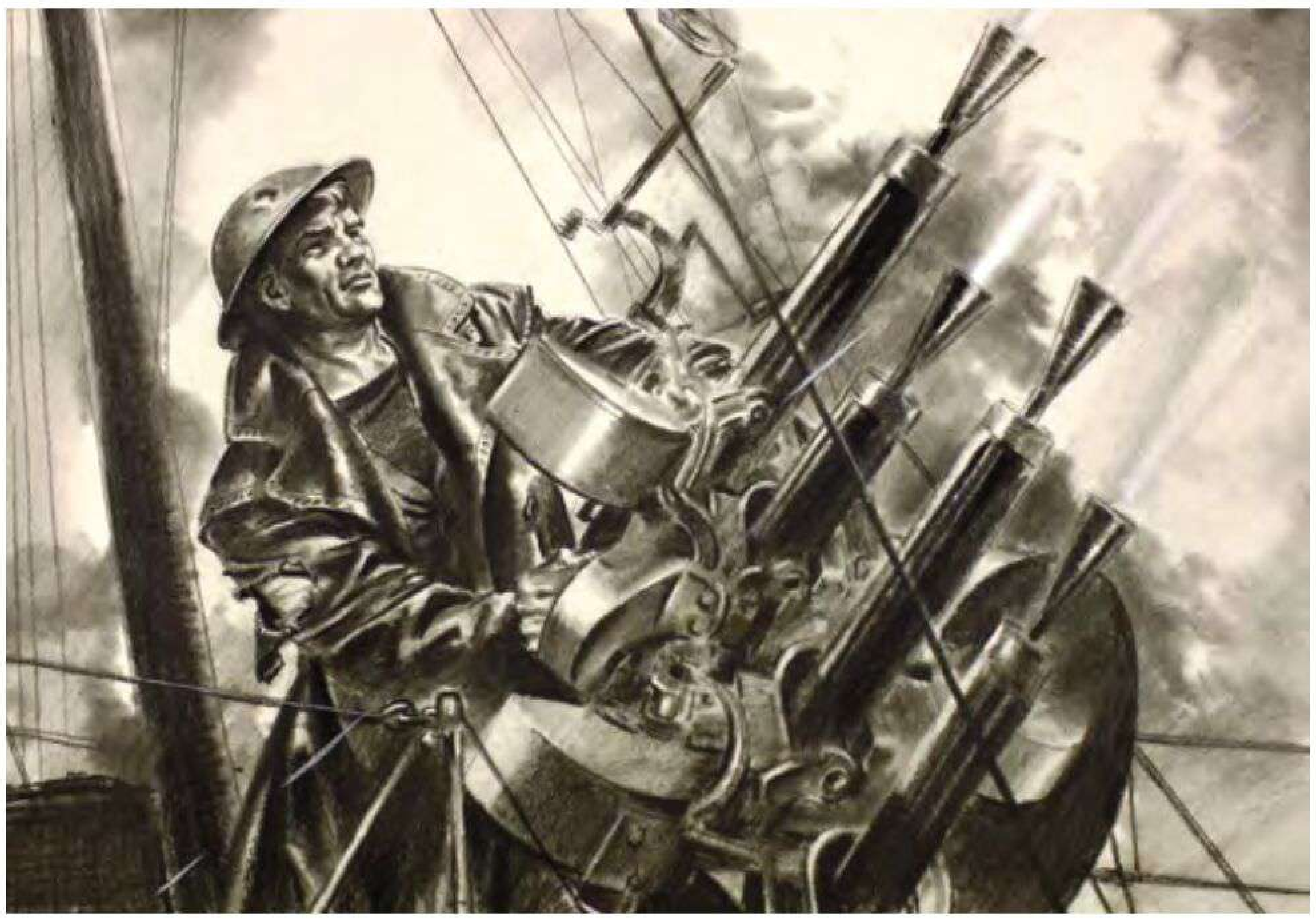
Though he was yet to issue formal instructions regarding an invasion of Great Britain, Hitler knew that any such operation could only begin after Göring's airmen had achieved air superiority. As the RAF historian Denis Richards wrote, "six weeks before the date when all was to be ready [for an invasion], the Luftwaffe would launch a major offensive against the Royal Air Force; and in the light of the degree of air superiority attained in the following fortnight, Hitler could then decide if the German Army's journey across the Channel would be either practicable or really necessary. Meanwhile, until the end of the first week in August, Göring's aircraft would reconnoitre and probe our defences, molest our shipping, and husband their strength for the great day."

Having used much of June 1940 as an opportunity to withdraw, rest and refit many units, the Luftwaffe's systematic attacks against British coastal targets and convoys that Richards describes commenced on July 4, 1940. Directed by Oberst Johannes Fink, the first major attack took place the same day, when a force of Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers, escorted by large numbers of Messerschmitt Bf 109s and 110s, attacked ships that were getting ready to depart Portland Harbour – one of the victims, as we shall see, was HMS *Foylebank*. The Kanalkampf, or Channel Fight, had begun.

KANALKAMPF

A press image that shows Dover Harbour under aerial attack at about the time that the Kanalkampf had come to an end. (Historic Military Press)





A wartime drawing, created at the behest of the Ministry of Information, that depicts Leading Seaman Jack Mantle during his VC action. (Historic Military Press)

As well as targeting shipping in the Channel, as the Kanalkampf raged on the Luftwaffe began increasingly raiding and strafing towns, harbours and installations all along the South Coast. On July 4, 1940, the C-in-C Portsmouth, Admiral Sir William James, wrote that "bombing has started in earnest and Portland has had a bad time from the dive-bombers, and we have lost six ships out of one convoy". The very same day that James penned these words, Portland naval base was to suffer its deadliest attack so far.

The Royal Navy's Harbourmaster, Edward Palmer, was on duty when the raiders struck: "I was proceeding down the inside harbour at about 08.30 in the morning… when out of the sun they came, enemy dive bombers. Diving straight down onto the guard ship, machine gunning and bombing. Hell let loose, about 20 planes, they appeared to have caught us napping."

As well as causing serious damage to the port installations at Portland, the bombing resulted in the sinking of HMS *Foylebank* – a 5,500-ton merchant vessel that had been requisitioned in September 1939 and converted into an anti-aircraft ship. *Foylebank* was anchored off the breakwater within Portland Harbour when the dive-bombers appeared overhead. Though the air-raid lasted for barely eight minutes, in which time 22 bombs found their mark, some 176 of the *Foylebank*'s 300-strong crew were killed; only 40 of the survivors remained uninjured.

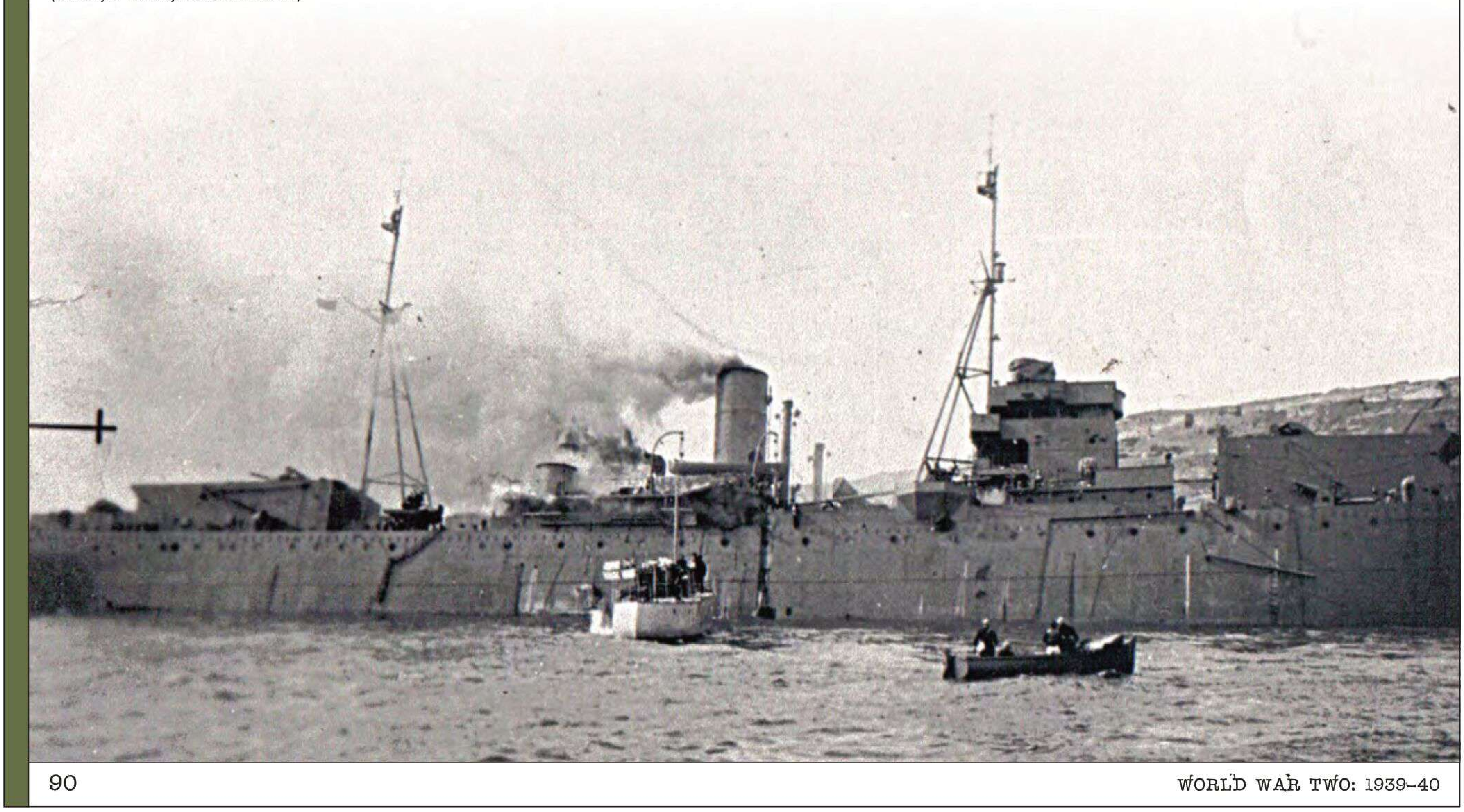
Helping operate *Foylebank*'s starboard 20-mm pom-pom was Leading Seaman Jack Mantle. A notable gunner, Mantle had already displayed gallantry while serving in the Naval Control Service on the Thames; he was one of the first naval gunners to bring down an enemy aircraft on convoy protection service, for which he was Mentioned in Despatches.

Though mortally wounded, Mantle remained at his post throughout the bombing on July 4. His actions did not go unnoticed, and although *Foylebank* was sunk, her commanding officer, Captain Wilson, submitted a report detailing the conduct of his crew. It was an account, noted Admiral James, that "would gladden your heart". Based on the information provided by Wilson, Admiral James went on to add: "I am recommending a Leading Seaman, Mantle, who behaved too magnificently for words and died at his gun, for the Victoria Cross."

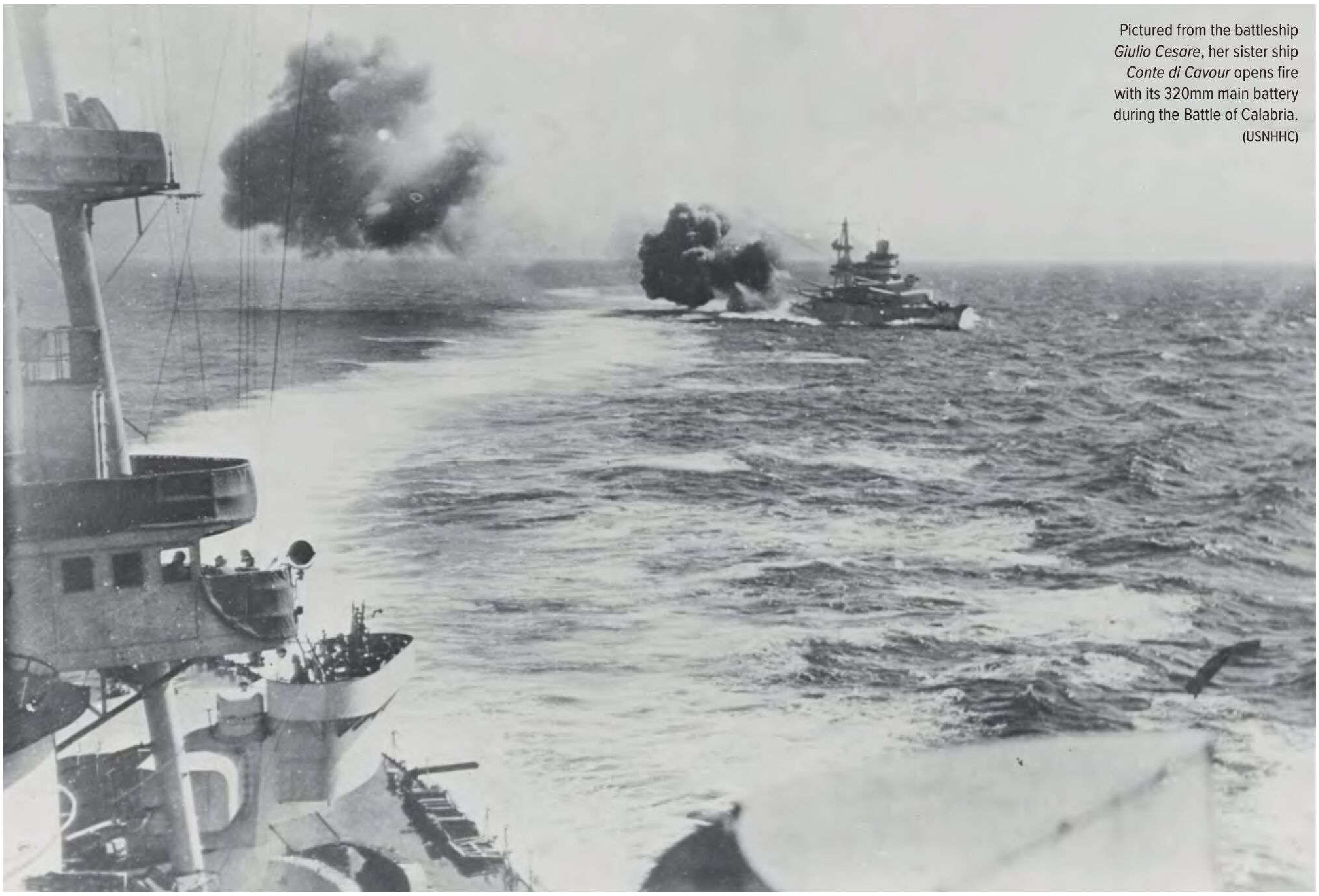
The announcement of Mantle's posthumous award of the VC, published in *The London Gazette* on September 3, 1940, provides more detail: "Leading Seaman Jack Mantle was in charge of the Starboard pom-pom gun when HMS *Foylebank* was attacked by enemy aircraft on the 4th of July 1940. Early in the action his left leg was shattered by a bomb, but he stood fast at his gun and went on firing with hand-gear only for the ship's electric power had failed. Almost at once he was wounded again in many places. Between his bursts of fire he had time to reflect on the grievous injuries of which he was soon to die but his great courage bore him up till the end of the fight, when he fell by the gun he had so valiantly served."

PORTLAND VC ACTION

The badly-damaged HMS *Foylebank* sinking in Portland Harbour on July 4, 1940. As the fires onboard raged, the electricity supply failed and the stricken ship listed to port, finally sinking the following day. (Courtesy of the Andy Saunders Collection)



THE BATTLE OF CALABRIA



Pictured from the battleship *Giulio Cesare*, her sister ship *Conte di Cavour* opens fire with its 320mm main battery during the Battle of Calabria. (USNHHC)

At the outbreak of war in 1939, the combined British and French naval forces in the Mediterranean far out-gunned the Italian fleet, the Regia Marina. Following France's surrender, however, Mussolini's warships suddenly found themselves in the position of being able to dominate the region.

On July 8, Italian seaplanes spotted a British convoy bound for Malta. The merchant ships were being covered by the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet; its commander, Vice Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, hoped that a show of force would draw the Italian surface fleet out into the open.

Cunningham knew that the Italians had at least two battleships at sea supported by cruisers, but as the Regia Marina's capital ships out-gunned all of the British ships except HMS *Warspite*, he sent out some of the 17 Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers embarked on the obsolescent aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*. Twice the Swordfish attacked, but none of their torpedoes found their target (though one hit on a cruiser was claimed). Cunningham set out to catch up with the Italians and bring them to battle.

Soon after the Swordfish attacks, an Italian seaplane located the British ships some 80 miles north-east of the Regia Marina battlefleet. The latter's commander, Admiral Inigo Campioni, correctly surmised that Cunningham was threatening to cut his route back to Taranto and also decided to close and engage Cunningham's forces. At about 15.00 hours both sides opened fire.

"The whole action took place at very long range," Cunningham later noted, adding "that *Warspite* was the only capital ship which got within range of the enemy battleships. *Malaya* fired a few salvos which fell some 3,000 yards short. *Royal Sovereign*, owing to her lack of speed, never got into action at all. *Warspite*'s hit on one of the enemy battleships at 26,000 yards range might perhaps be described as a lucky one. Its tactical effect was to induce the enemy to turn away and break off the action… The chase was continued under exceedingly heavy bombing attacks until the British Fleet was 25 miles from the Calabrian Coast, and was then reluctantly abandoned, the destroyers being very short of fuel and the enemy fleet well below the horizon."

To Cunningham, what was later called the Battle of Calabria – it had occurred 30 miles east of Punta Stilo, Calabria – failed to deliver the decisive victory that he had hoped for, despite the size of the forces involved: "The meagre material results derived from this brief meeting with the Italian Fleet were naturally very disappointing to me and all under my command, but the action was not without value. It must have shown the Italians that their Air Force and submarines cannot stop our Fleet penetrating into the Central Mediterranean and that only their main fleet can seriously interfere with our operating there. It established, I think, a certain degree of moral ascendency, since although superior in battleships, our Fleet was heavily outnumbered in cruisers and destroyers, and the Italians had strong shore-based air forces within easy range."

The aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*. An aircraft carrier was the one resource that the Regia Marina did not possess in 1940. (Historic Military Press)

The fuselage of a Messerschmitt Bf 109E4, believed to be Red 2 of 3/LG 2, lies in a salvage yard during the Battle of Britain. This is the Bf 109E-7 flown by Unteroffizier August Klick who crash-landed on the Isle of Sheppey on the afternoon of September 15, 1940 after being shot down by a pilot of 19 Squadron.

As the attacks on shipping in the Channel continued, the Luftwaffe had some success in drawing Fighter Command into action. Dowding himself later noted: "The heavy attacks made against our Channel convoys probably constituted, in fact, the beginning of the German offensive; because the weight and scale of the attack indicates that the primary object was rather to bring our Fighters to battle than to destroy the hulls and cargoes of the small ships engaged in the coastal trade."

The Germans were confident that their strategy would work. "It will take," reported General Otto Stapf to General Franz Halder on July 11, "between a fortnight and a month to smash the enemy air force". However, in the weeks that followed that optimism soon began to fade.

The aerial battle over Britain can be broken down into several distinct phases, though these vary between publications and sources. The RAF Museum, for example, states that there were five, the first of which was the Kanalkampf. The second phase, lasting from July 17 to August 12, saw, continues the RAF Museum, "increasing and larger daylight attacks against shipping in the English Channel, ports along the South and East coasts and some coastal airfields, with increased night attacks against the West, Midlands, and East Coast, RAF facilities and the aircraft industry".

Phase three began on August 13 and ended on September 6. It involved "large-scale daylight attacks against RAF airfields in South-East England, with the object of exhausting the RAF's ability to provide a defence". From September 7 until October 2, as phase four, the Luftwaffe predominantly launched large-scale day and night attacks against London. The final, fifth stage, concludes the RAF Museum, involved "smaller scale daylight fighter-bomber attacks while large-scale night attacks continued mainly against London". This period ended on October 31.

Dowding wrote that the underlying objective of the Luftwaffe in the summer of 1940 was to bring Fighter Command continuously to battle, and to weaken its material resources and Intelligence facilities. Exactly when these operations began, and when they ended are far from certain dates. Consequently, over the years since the summer of 1940 there has been much discussion over the start date of the Battle of Britain.

Some have stated that it was June 19, 1940, this being the date of the first major bombing attack on British mainland targets. The Air Ministry report on the Battle, published in March 1941, decreed that the Battle had taken place between August 8 (this being the day that saw the pitched battles surrounding Convoy CW.8, which was codenamed *Peewit*) and October 31, 1940. At the end of the war the Air Ministry briefly flirted with July 1, while in his despatch Air Chief Marshal Dowding opted for July 10 as the starting point, albeit conceding that a strong case could be made for August 8. Today it is generally accepted that the Battle of Britain, a period in which the country's fate hung in the balance, started on July 10.

THE START OF THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

A pair of 501 Squadrons taking off from RAF Hawkinge on August 16, 1940. Pilot Officer Kenneth 'Hawkeye' Lee is at the controls of P3059/SD-N, whilst Pilot Officer John W Bland is flying P3028/SD-T. (Historic Military Press)

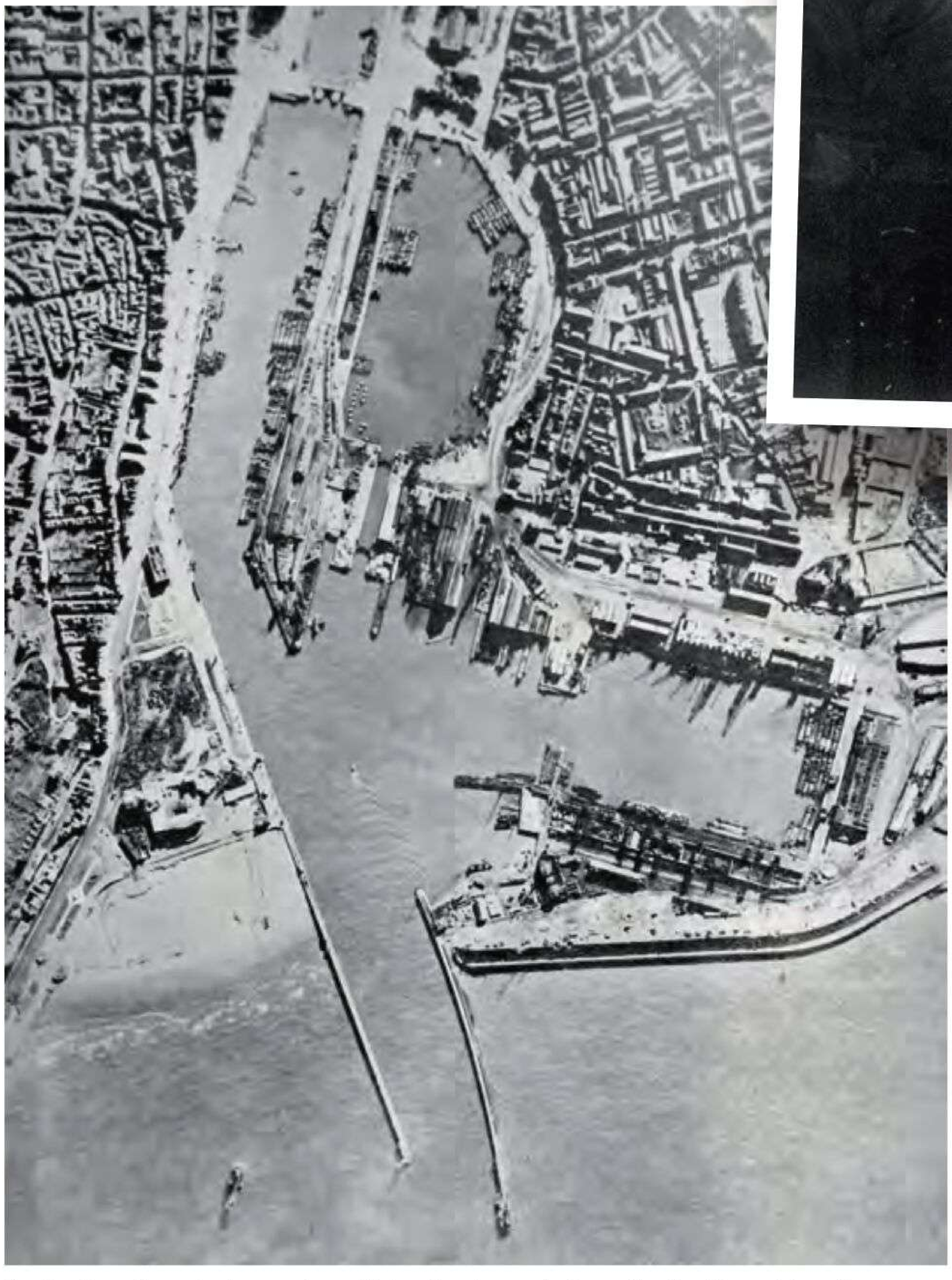
HITLER'S DIRECTIVE No.16

Having been assured by the likes of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring that the Luftwaffe would prove victorious over the RAF, a conviction based in no small part on the successes that German pilots and aircrews had achieved so far in the war, Hitler began to devote more time to the question of invading Britain.

On July 16, 1940, Hitler, who was staying at the Berghof, his residence in the Obersalzberg of the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden, signed off the latest of his Führerbefehle, or Führer Directives. These instructions and strategic plans could cover a wide range of subjects, from specific military operations through to the governance of occupied countries. In the eyes of the administration of the Third Reich these documents were completely binding and were to be enacted without question. They superseded any other law or ruling in place at the time. It was Führer Directive No.16 that was to cover "preparations for a landing operation against England".

"Since England [*sic*], in spite of her hopeless military situation, shows no signs of being ready to come to an understanding," began Hitler, "I have decided to prepare a landing operation against England and, if necessary, to carry it out. The aim of this operation will be to eliminate the English homeland as a base for the prosecution of the war against Germany and, if necessary, to occupy it completely. The landing will be in the form of a surprise crossing on a wide front from about Ramsgate to the area west of the Isle of Wight. Luftwaffe units will act as artillery, and Kriegsmarine units as engineers."

Along with Albert Speer (left) and Arno Breker (right), Hitler poses for the camera near the Eiffel Tower on June 23, 1940. France's surrender the previous day had brought his forces within striking distance of Britain. (Historic Military Press)



A collection of invasion barges, brought together for use in Operation *Seelöwe*, pictured in Boulogne Harbour during the preparations for the landings against the UK. (Historic Military Press)

Hitler then outlined the conditions that needed to be met for the operation, which was codenamed *Seelöwe* (*Sealion*), to be possible: "(a) The English Air Force must be so reduced morally and physically that it is unable to deliver any significant attack against the German crossing; (b) Mine-free channels must be created; (c) The Dover Strait must be closely sealed off with minefields on both flanks; also the Western entrance to the Channel approximately on the line Alderney-Portland; (d) Strong forces of coastal artillery must command and protect the forward coastal area; and (e) It is desirable that the English Navy be tied down shortly before the crossing, both in the North Sea and in the Mediterranean (by the Italians). For this purpose, we must attempt even now to damage English home-based naval forces by air and torpedo attack as far as possible."

Despite the scale of the task that the planners at Oberkommando der Wehrmacht were presented with under this Directive, Hitler added that the "preparations for the entire operation must be completed by the middle of August".

On August 1, Hitler issued Führer Directive No.17. A far briefer document than its predecessor, containing only six main points, it provided instructions "for the conduct of air and sea warfare against England". All that remained now was for the Luftwaffe to fulfil its allotted task and emerge victorious in the battle for Britain's skies.

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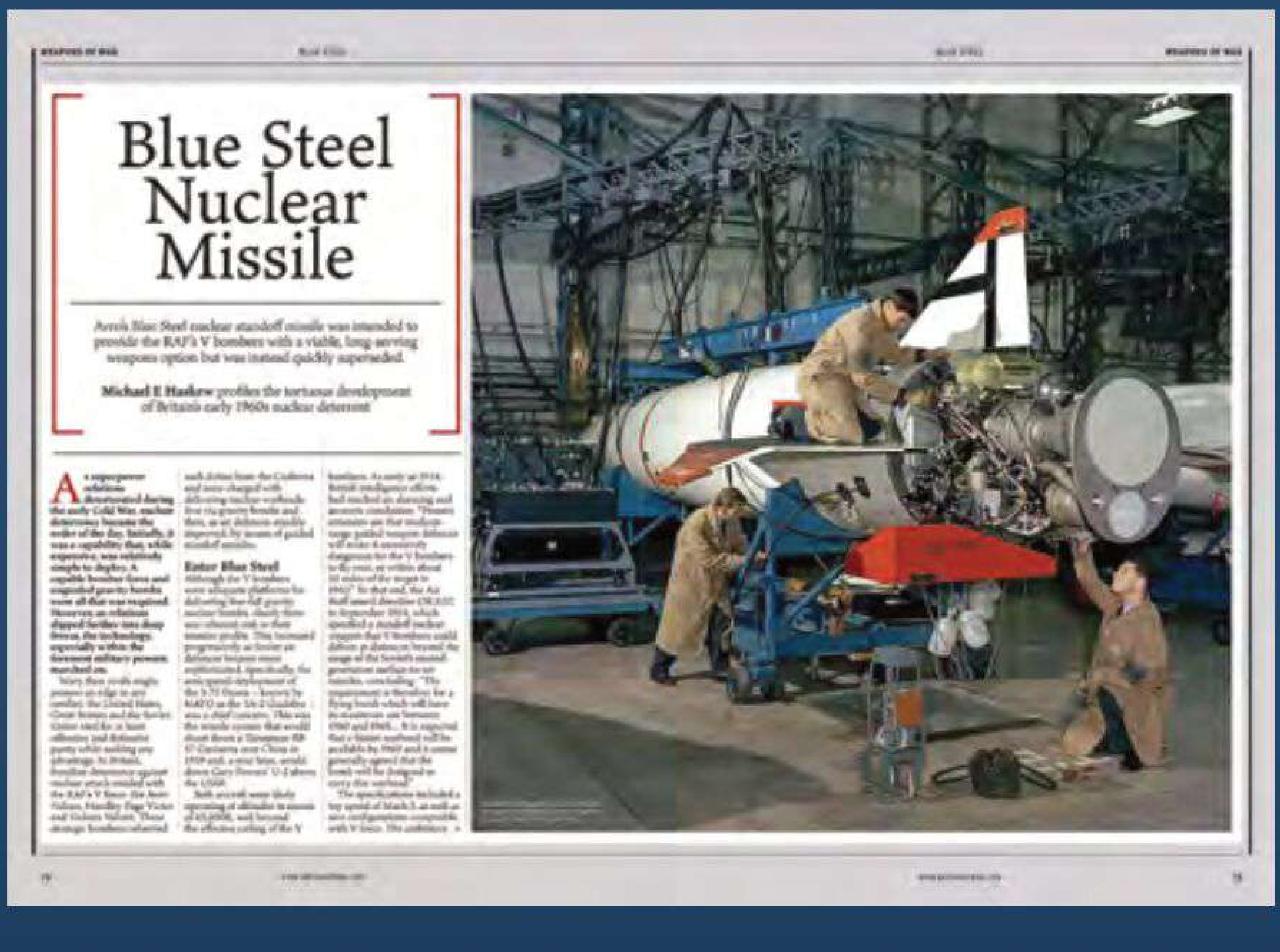

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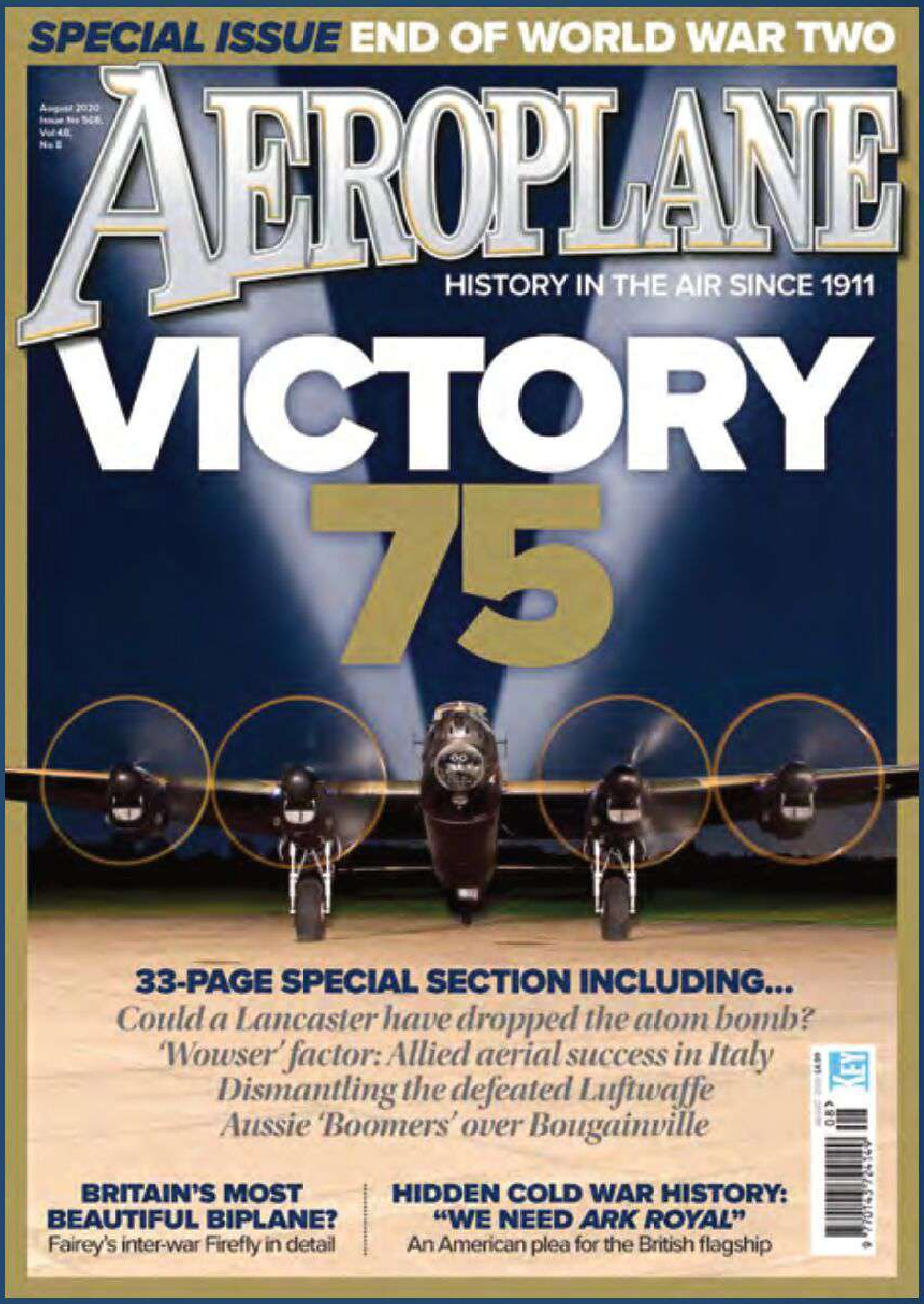
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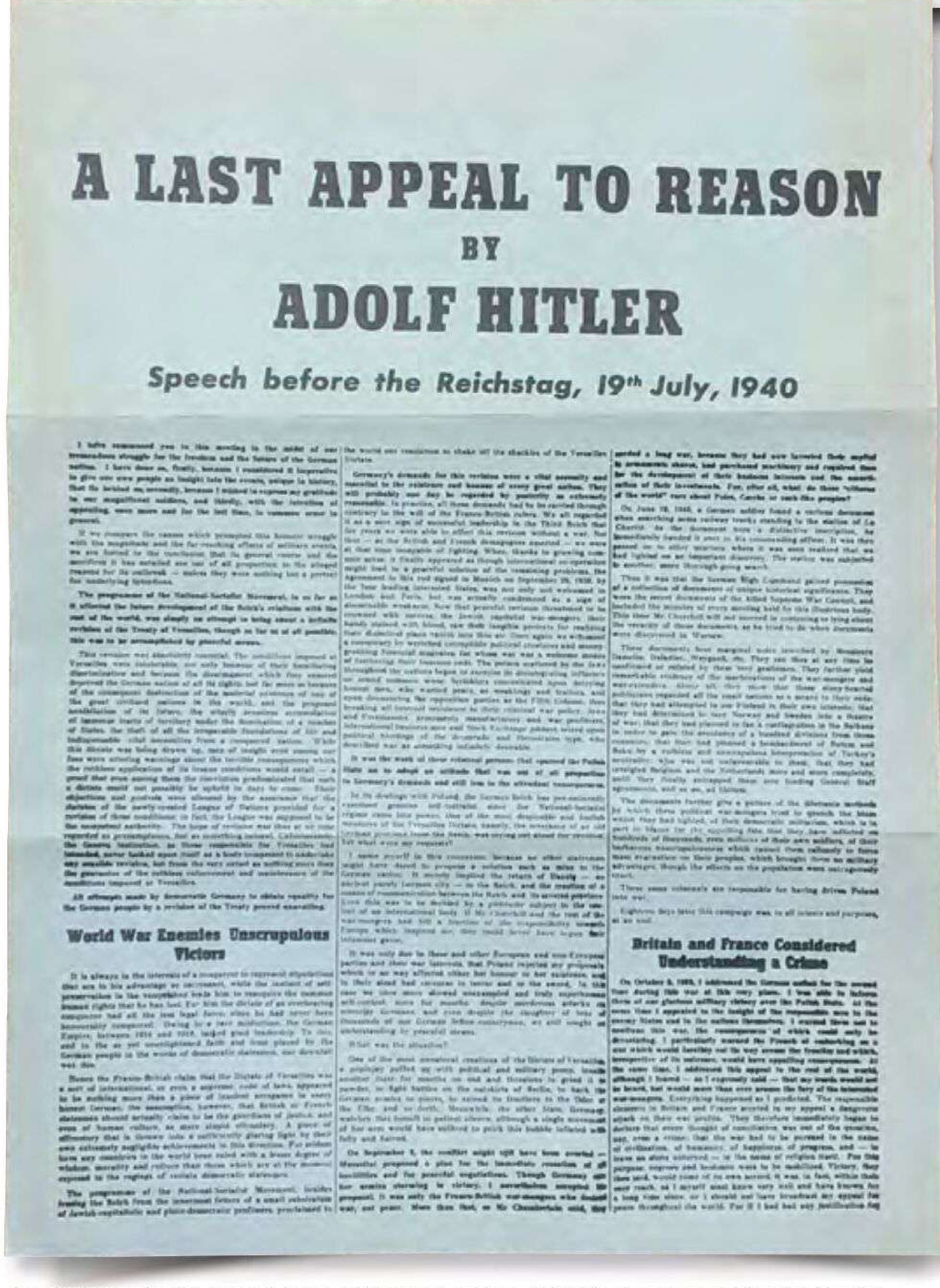
HITLER'S LAST APPEAL TO REASON

Even though he had only just issued his orders for the preparations for the invasion of the United Kingdom to begin, and the Luftwaffe had been unleashed in what would become the Battle of Britain, Hitler, who many consider was an Anglophile, decided to give Churchill and his government one final opportunity to end the fighting.

In his diary entry of July 13, 1940, General Franz Halder, chief of the Oberkommando des Heeres, the German Army's High Command, noted that "The Führer is greatly puzzled by Britain's persisting unwillingness to make peace… a military defeat of Britain will bring about the disintegration of the British Empire. This would not be of any benefit to Germany. German blood would be shed to accomplish something that would benefit only Japan, the United States, and others."

Hitler making a speech in the Reichstag, the same place in which he made his "Last Appeal to Reason". (Danish National Archives)



A LAST APPEAL TO REASON

BY

ADOLF HITLER

Speech before the Reichstag, 19th July, 1940

World War Enemies Unscrupulous Victors

Britain and France Considered Understanding a Crime

Throughout July and August, large numbers of copies of Hitler's speech were dropped by the Luftwaffe at locations throughout Britain. (Historic Military Press)

The next day, Halder reiterated such sentiments: "The Führer confirms my impressions of yesterday. He would like an understanding with Great Britain."

General Günther Blumentritt, another senior staff officer, also recorded similar recollections: "[Hitler] astonished us by speaking with admiration of the British Empire, of the necessity for its existence.... He compared the British Empire with the Catholic Church – saying they were both essential elements of stability in the world."

What was described as "A Last Appeal to Reason" was in fact a speech made in the Reichstag on July 19, 1940. As well as outlining the war situation so far, Hitler made a direct appeal to the British. In this address he stated: "Even today I still regret that in spite of all my efforts I have not succeeded in achieving that friendship with England which would have been a blessing for both peoples. I was not successful in spite of determined and honest efforts… I do realize that this struggle, if it continues, can end only with the complete annihilation of one or the other of the two adversaries. Mr. Churchill may believe this will be Germany. I know that it will be Britain.

"In this hour I feel it to be my duty before my own conscience to appeal once more to reason and common sense in Great Britain as much as elsewhere. I consider myself in a position to make this appeal, since I am not the vanquished, begging favours, but the victor speaking in the name of reason. I can see no reason why this war must go on. I am grieved to think of the sacrifices it will claim… Possibly Mr. Churchill again will brush aside this statement of mine by saying that it is merely born of fear and of doubt in our final victory. In that case I shall have relieved my conscience in regard to the things to come."

In Britain Hitler's speech was generally met with a mixture of disinterest and derision. *The Scotsman*, for example, reported that, "Except in Italy and Spain, Hitler's peace offer has evoked nothing by sceptical comment. It has certainly made no impression in Britain."

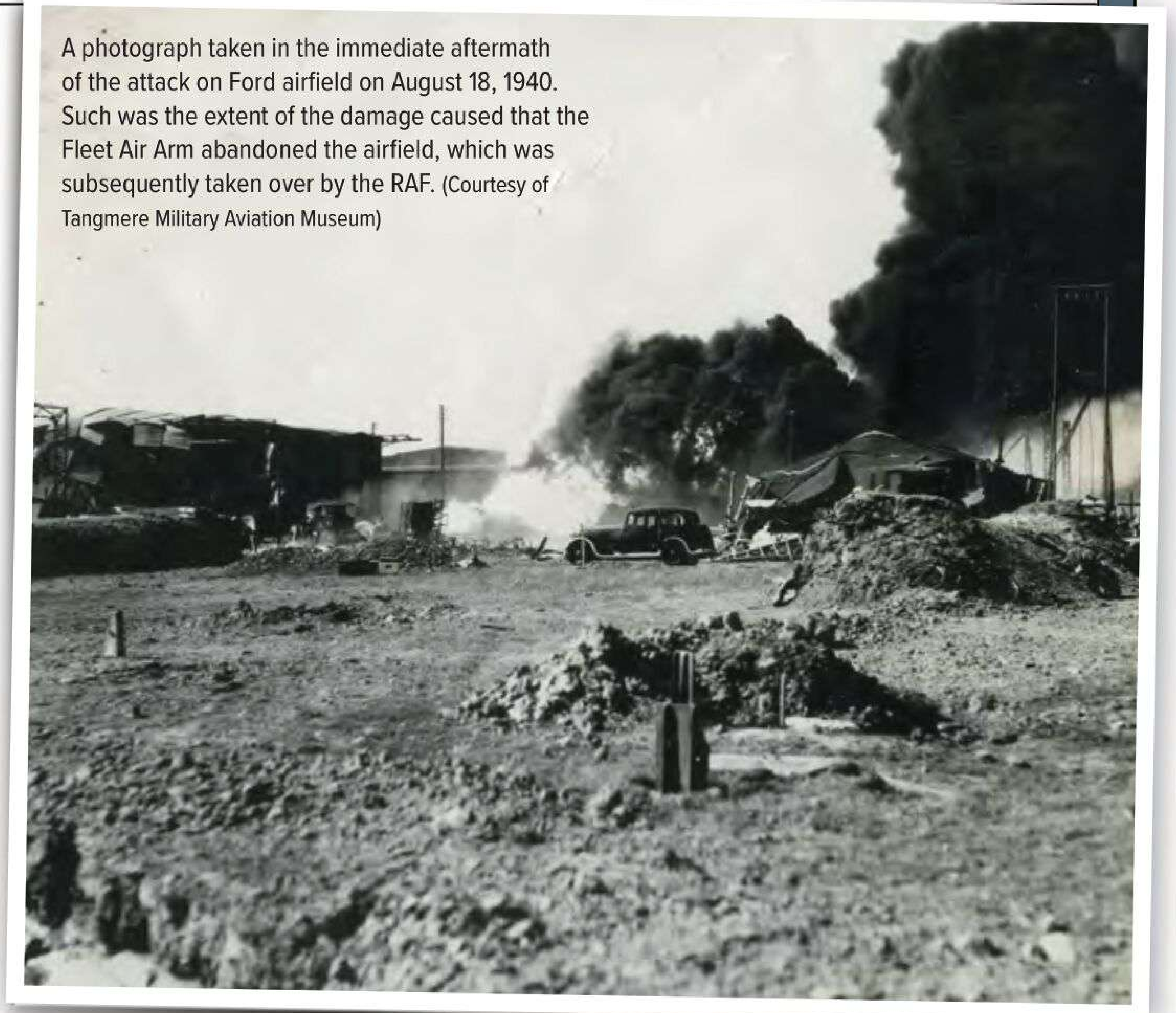
Throughout the Battle of Britain, there were a number of dates on which the events stood out above the others of that summer. One of these, in what the RAF Museum states was the third phase of the battle, was August 18.

Still desperately trying to beat Fighter Command into submission in their effort to gain aerial supremacy, which their intelligence erroneously suggested was the case, on the 18th the Luftwaffe launched all-out attacks in two general areas. All told, Goring's aircraft undertook 850 sorties involving 2,200 aircrew. For its part, the RAF resisted with equal vigour, flying 927 sorties.

The main strike was against the airfields of Kenley, Biggin Hill, Hornchurch, and North Weald; the other was directed towards Portsmouth. While this latter raid was not small by any means, it was considered a diversionary attack, the Luftwaffe's primary objective being to damage Fighter Command's airfields – as had been the case for the preceding five days.

This was quickly recognised by the ground controllers, who identified Kenley and Biggin Hill as being among the main targets. The attack on Kenley was largely broken up, but the German bombers were able to reach Biggin Hill and release their bombs with minimal opposition; fortunately for those on the ground, most of the bombs fell short of the airfield.

Biggin Hill's satellite station, West Malling, was also hit. But retribution was swift, in the form of Nos. 32 and 610 squadrons. Squadron Leader Michael Crossley, leading the Hurricanes of 32 Squadron, was vectored onto the enemy. As the two formations closed over Sevenoaks, Crossley manoeuvred his squadron to meet the Germans head on. "We sighted them as we were coming from Biggin Hill, and swung round in front of them," he later wrote. "We didn't have to work very hard to do it. We had plenty of time to line up." The enemy formation consisted of around 60 aircraft which included Dornier Do 17s and Junkers Ju 88s, with an escort of 40 Bf 109s and Bf 110s. The Hurricanes tore into the German formation.



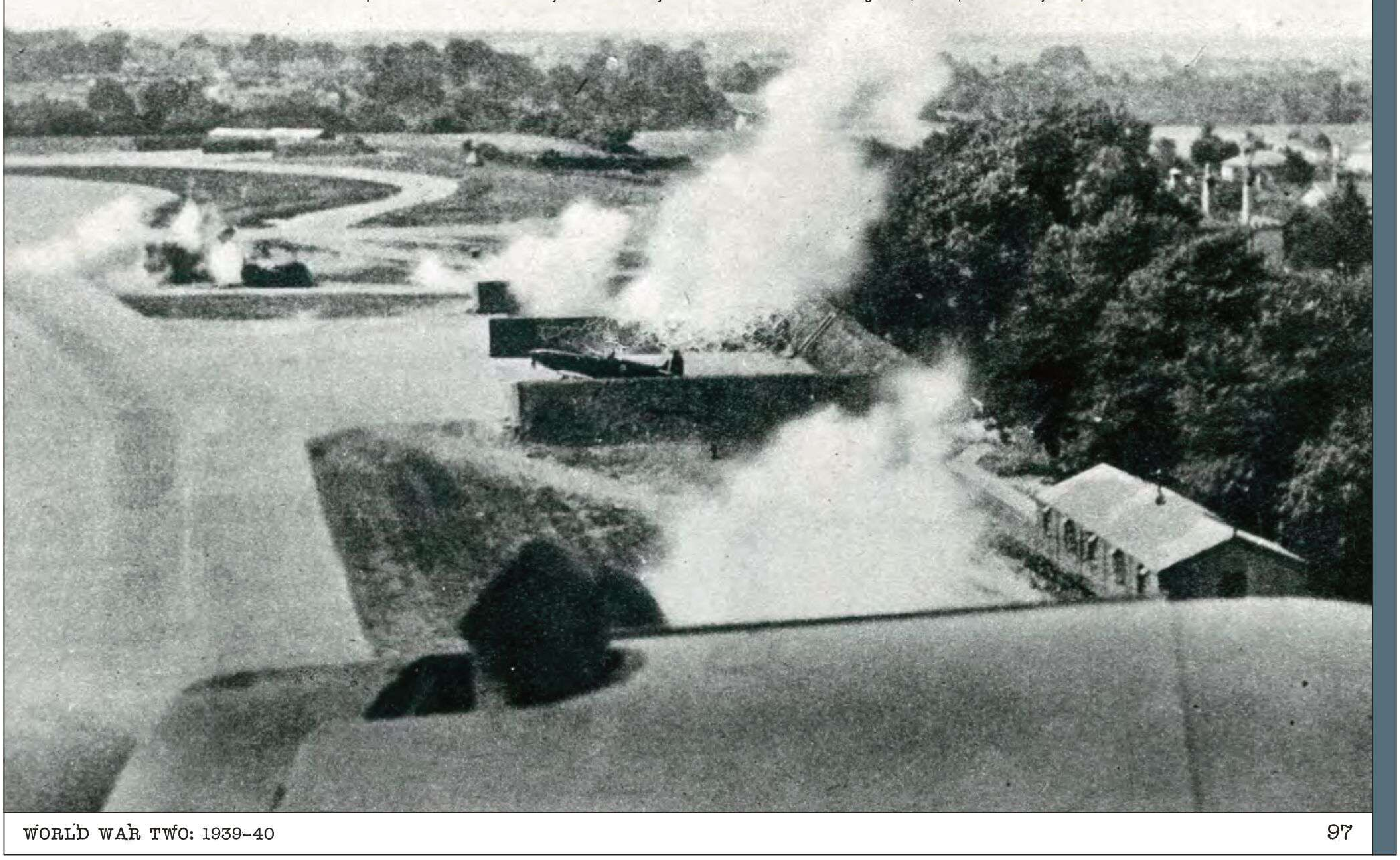
A photograph taken in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Ford airfield on August 18, 1940. Such was the extent of the damage caused that the Fleet Air Arm abandoned the airfield, which was subsequently taken over by the RAF. (Courtesy of Tangmere Military Aviation Museum)

In one part of the southern, presumed diversionary attack, at around midday 109 Stuka dive bombers, escorted by 150 Bf 109 fighters, attacked the radar station at Poling in West Sussex and the Fleet Air Arm airfield at nearby Ford. The latter suffered heavy damage, while Poling lost one of the radar towers, but the Germans paid a high price for that success, as 17 Stuka and eight Bf 109s were shot down. The Stukas were becoming obsolescent by this stage of the war and, after such heavy losses, they played no further part in the Battle of Britain.

Though actual figures vary, both sides lost around 70 aircraft destroyed or damaged beyond repair. August 18 saw the heaviest fighting to date and has been known ever since as the 'Hardest Day' of the battle. The air battles that took place on that Sunday were among the largest aerial engagements in history to that time.

THE HARDEST DAY

A view of Spitfires and shelters at Kenley under attack by a Dornier Do 17 of KG76 on August 18, 1940. (Historic Military Press)



DESTROYERS FOR BASES

The US Attorney General, Robert H Jackson, Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, Acting Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, and Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, at the White House on August 22, 1940 after a conference on the 'Destroyers for Bases' agreement. (USNHHC)

Even before France had surrendered, the British Chiefs of Staff Committee, no doubt drawing on the experiences of World War One, concluded that the UK could not "continue the war with any chance of success" without the "full economic and financial support" of the United States of America. America, though, was neutral.

As early as July 1940, Churchill had made tentative approaches to President Roosevelt for US support, the two having already formed a working relationship whilst the Prime Minister was still the First Lord of the Admiralty. However, the Neutrality Acts passed by Congress in the 1930s forbade the shipment or sale of arms by the US to any combatant nation – and that included Britain. With his hands seemingly tied, Roosevelt sought a solution.

The answer, for both parties, came in the form of a straight-forward trade. Churchill had asked for a number of ex-US Navy warships. Under the terms of the new scheme, Roosevelt agreed to provide more than 50 obsolete destroyers in exchange for 99-year leases to territory in Newfoundland and the Caribbean. Under what became known as the 'Destroyers for Bases' agreement, these locations would then be used as American air and naval bases.

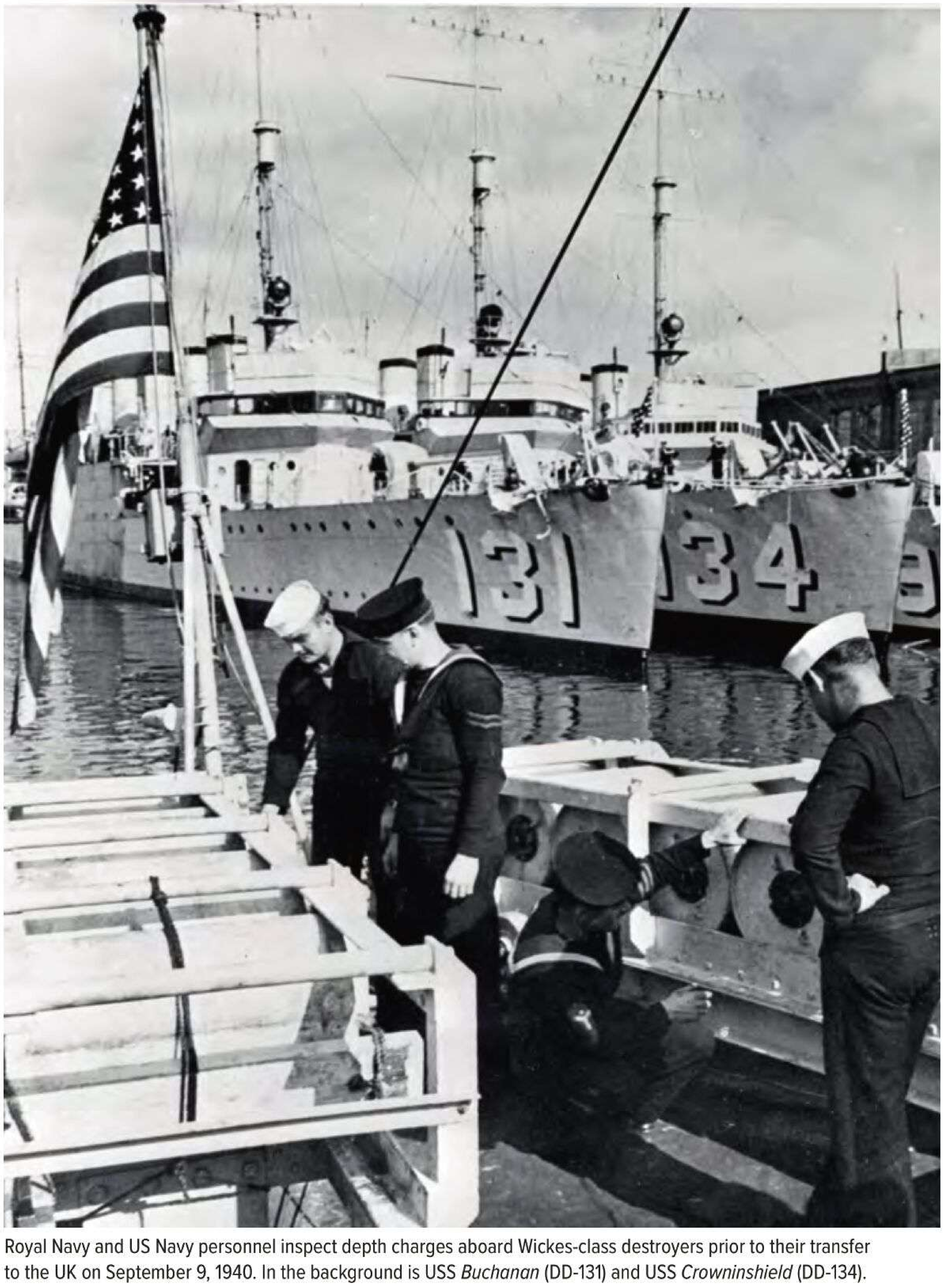
Churchill had originally requested that Roosevelt provide the destroyers as a gift, but the President knew that the American public and Congress would oppose such a deal. He believed that a deal which gave the United States long-term access to such bases could be justified as essential to the security of America and its interests in the Western Hemisphere – thereby assuaging the concerns of the public and the US military.

Roosevelt was eager to confirm that he had the power to enter into such an agreement without first bringing it before Congress. He duly sought the views of the Attorney General, Robert H. Jackson – who replied that the President did. Jackson believed the Constitution gave the president the power under his title as Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy.

An agreement was swiftly agreed on September 2, 1940. The 99-year leases were guaranteed to be "free from all rent and charges other than such compensation to be mutually agreed on to be paid by the United States". Bases would be established in the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Antigua and British Guiana. Separately, bases in Newfoundland and Bermuda were "gifts generously given and gladly received", these being considered vital to the trans-Atlantic convoy routes.

The following day Roosevelt outlined the agreement to Congress. "This [scheme] is not inconsistent in any sense with our status of peace," he assured those present. "Still less is it a threat against any nation… The value to the Western Hemisphere of these outposts of security is beyond calculation… For these reasons I have taken advantage of the present opportunity to acquire them."

The destroyers became the Town-class in Royal Navy service. Each one was renamed after towns common to both the US and Britain.



Royal Navy and US Navy personnel inspect depth charges aboard Wickes-class destroyers prior to their transfer to the UK on September 9, 1940. In the background is USS *Buchanan* (DD-131) and USS *Crowninshield* (DD-134). *Buchanan* became HMS *Campbeltown*, which gained fame for its part in the St. Nazaire Raid in March 1942. *Crowninshield* became HMS *Chelsea*. (Library of Congress)

From the very start of the war, Londoners had expected to be subjected to massive air strikes, but until the start of the Battle of Britain the capital had all but escaped the attentions of the Luftwaffe. On the night of August 17, 1940, bombs were dropped on Woolwich and Eltham – the first to fall in the London County Council area itself. A week later, on the 24th, the raiders crept closer to the heart of the city, when bombs were reported to have fallen at Aldgate, at Bloomsbury, Bethnal Green, Finsbury, Hackney, Stepney, Shoreditch and West Ham.

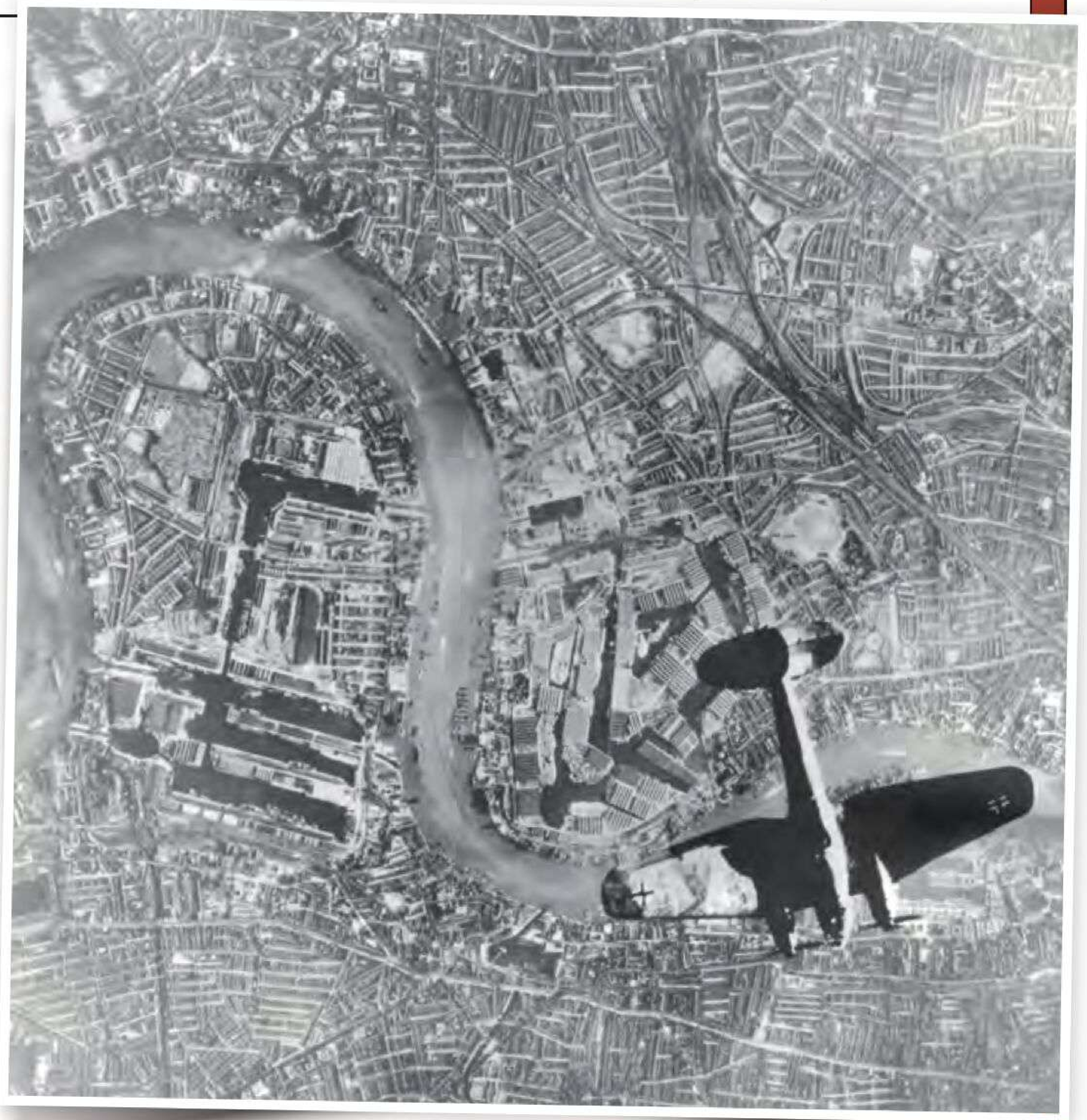
Following these attacks, the War Cabinet sanctioned Bomber Command's first raid on Berlin. As a result, on the night of August 25/26, a total force of 103 aircraft, mostly Hampdens and Wellingtons, was despatched to Germany, approximately half of which attacked the capital. As the RAF's official historian, Denis Richards, later wrote of the first RAF attacks, "Incidents of this nature were naturally galling to the Führer".

Hitler felt compelled to respond. London's fate was finally sealed during a meeting between Göring and the commanders of Luftflottens II and III – Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring and Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle respectively – at The Hague on September 3, 1940. The intention was not purely to revenge the bombing of Berlin, but also to draw the RAF's fighters into combat.

Hitler's permission for the Luftwaffe to strike at the very heart of London was duly given on September 5. "The Luftwaffe [therefore] abandoned its offensive against the sector stations and began the assault on London," concluded Richards. "From the point of view of winning the battle [of Britain], Dowding himself could not have made a more satisfactory decision." That same day, the 5th, the Luftwaffe high command, the Oberkommando der Luftwaffe, or OKL, issued the orders for a force of over 300 bombers, with massive fighter cover, to attack the docks in London's East End on the afternoon of September 7.

The first Luftwaffe attack was timed to commence at 17.00 hours on that fateful Saturday. The 348 bombers and 617 fighters crossed the Channel and bore down on London on schedule, their main target the docks in the East End. "I'd never seen so many aircraft," recalled Squadron Leader Sandy Johnstone of 602 Squadron. "It was a hazy sort of day to about 16,000 feet. As we broke through the haze, you could hardly believe it. As far as you could see, there was nothing but German aircraft coming in, wave after wave."

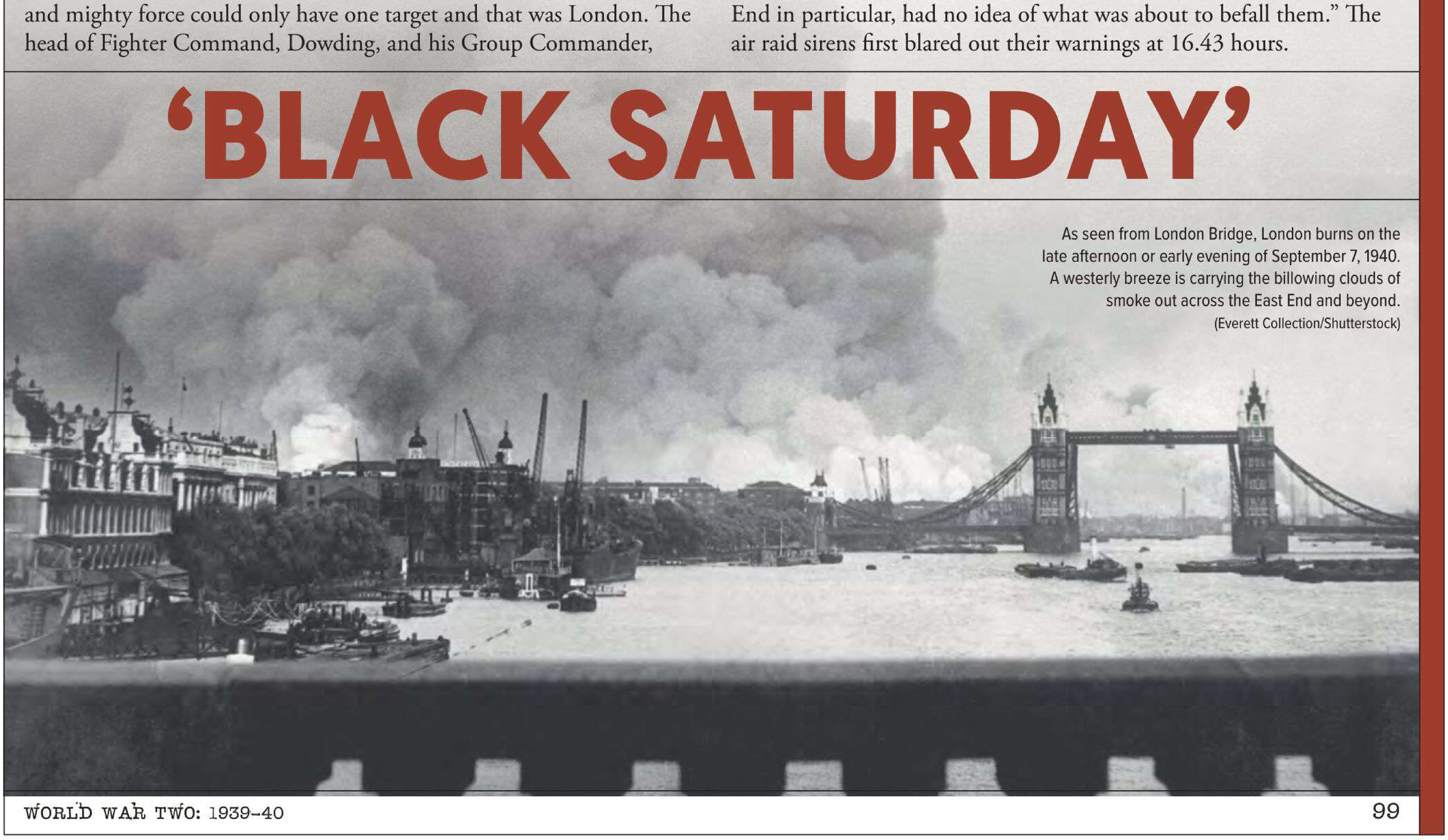
"It must have been just before 17.00 hours that it became clear that this was no ordinary raid," wrote the historian Ian Jones MBE in his book *London – Bombed, Blitzed and Blown Up*. "Such a concentrated and mighty force could only have one target and that was London. The head of Fighter Command, Dowding, and his Group Commander, Keith Park, quickly realized this. But for the population of London, despite the air raid sirens, which some people now ignored, there was no such appreciation.



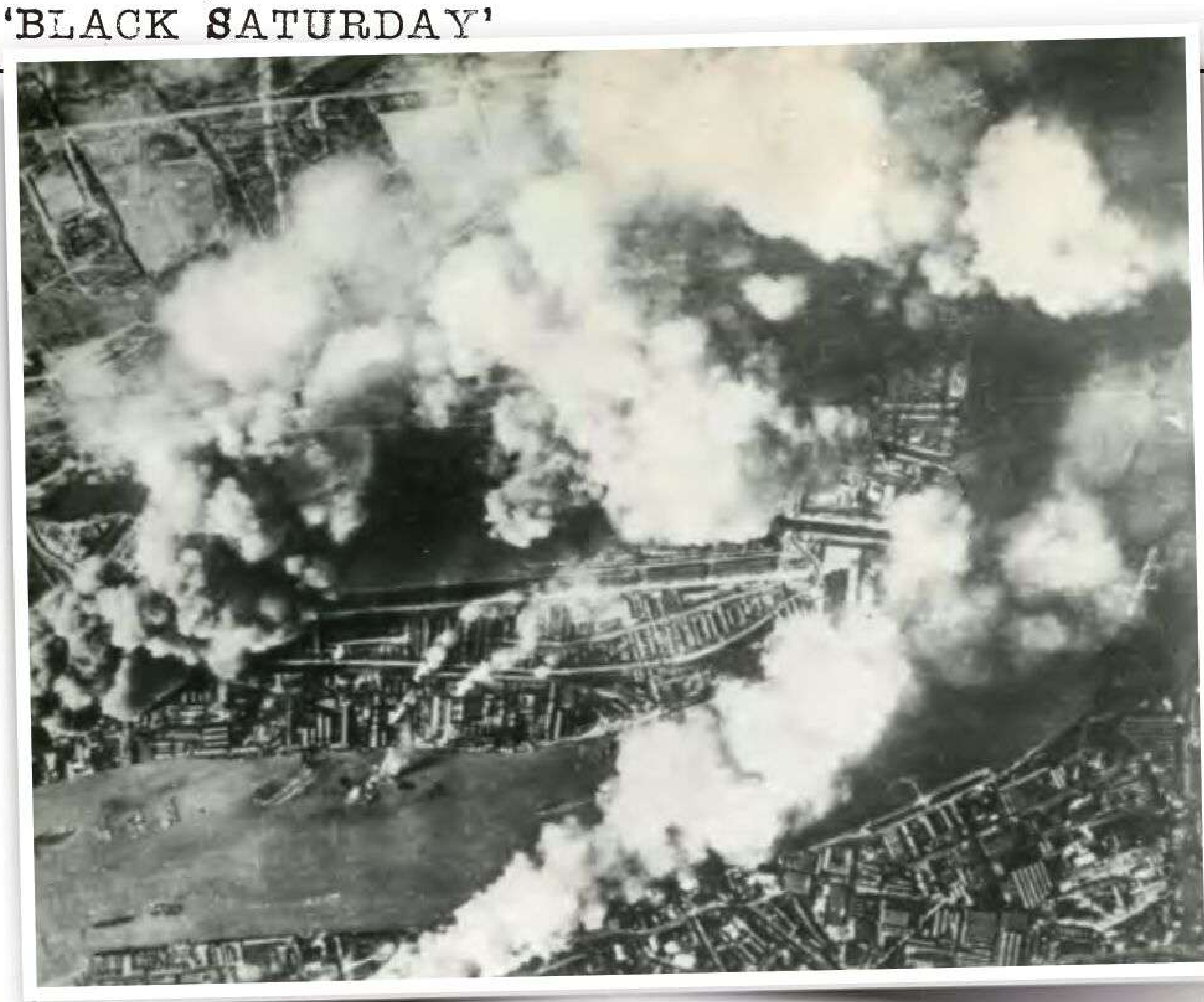
One of the most famous images to emerge from the Blitz. Taken at 18.48 hours (German time), it shows a Heinkel He 111 over Wapping during the first wave of attackers on September 7, 1940. The area within the characteristic U-bend of the River Thames was designated by the Luftwaffe as Zieläum (or Target Area) G. (Everett Collection/Shutterstock)

"Away to the east, the Luftwaffe aircraft massed in a huge, phalanx-shaped formation, which was stepped from 14,000 to 23,000 feet. It advanced on a twenty-mile front towards the Thames Estuary. Like a relentless juggernaut the bombers bore down on the capital. Though harried by more and more Spitfires and Hurricanes, the protective screen of Messerschmitts mostly held them at bay and the British fighters were unable to seriously blunt or deflect the bomber force. Below and ahead of them the people of London, and those in the East End in particular, had no idea of what was about to befall them." The air raid sirens first blared out their warnings at 16.43 hours.

'BLACK SATURDAY'



As seen from London Bridge, London burns on the late afternoon or early evening of September 7, 1940. A westerly breeze is carrying the billowing clouds of smoke out across the East End and beyond. (Everett Collection/Shutterstock)



Palls of smoke rise over the docks and East End on September 7, 1940. The fires at the lower left are described as burning in the Victoria Docks. (National Museum of Denmark)

A view of bomb damage in Threadneedle Street, in the City, taken on the morning of September 8, 1940. The damage was the result of the bombing the previous day and night. (Historic Military Press)

A young Donald Wharf was playing in the garden of his family home in Newham. "The noise from outside was getting steadily louder and louder," he later told the Newham Archives. "Then they were right overhead – our ears were bombarded with sounds: gunfire, the throbbing of enemy aircraft, but worse, the 'crunch' of their bombs. Slowly though, after a massive explosion, it all simply faded away. What was no more than a lull in the storm, soon ended and more Dorniers came in another great wave – their bombs crashing all round us. I wished it would end but the bombers kept coming – dozens and dozens it seemed, dropping their bombs more or less as they pleased."

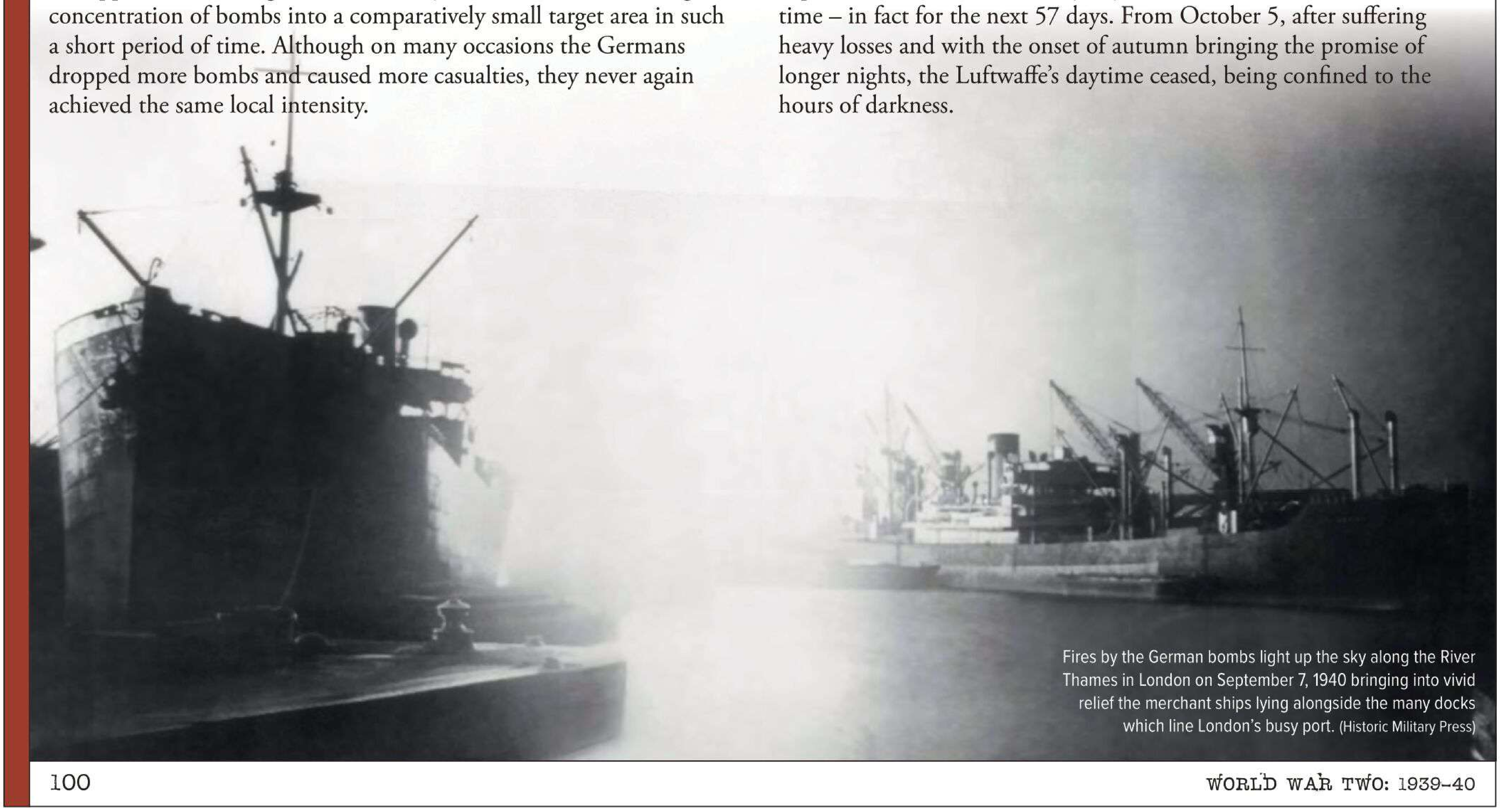
For minute after agonising minute the bombs continued to rain down until, at 18.10 hours, the 'All Clear' sounded. During the 60 or so minutes that preceded it, the devastation wrought on parts of London had been enormous. But it was only the lull before the storm.

Guided by the fires still raging in the East End, the German bombers returned during the night to continue raining down death and destruction. It was not until 05.00 hours the following morning, as the sun came up on Sunday, September 8, that the 'All Clear' sounded out over the East End again.

Although many did not realise it at the time, the East End had endured the most devastating bombing attack of the war to date. In terms of aerial attacks on London, the first wave of German bombers the previous afternoon had set a benchmark that would not be supplanted; never again would enemy aircraft deliver such a high concentration of bombs into a comparatively small target area in such a short period of time. Although on many occasions the Germans dropped more bombs and caused more casualties, they never again achieved the same local intensity.

Winston Churchill visited the East End on the afternoon of September 8, 1940, to see for himself the effects of the bombing the previous night. He is pictured here with West Ham Town Clerk, Charles E Cranfield, on the corner of Winchester Street and Factory Road inspecting the ruins of the Silvertown Rubber Company. (Historic Military Press)

A total of 436 men, women and children had been killed during that first night of the Blitz, whilst a further 1,600 were severely wounded. To the dismay of Londoners, the German bombers returned again on September 8 and, indeed, every day thereafter for some considerable time – in fact for the next 57 days. From October 5, after suffering heavy losses and with the onset of autumn bringing the promise of longer nights, the Luftwaffe's daytime ceased, being confined to the hours of darkness.



Fires by the German bombs light up the sky along the River Thames in London on September 7, 1940 bringing into vivid relief the merchant ships lying alongside the many docks which line London's busy port. (Historic Military Press)

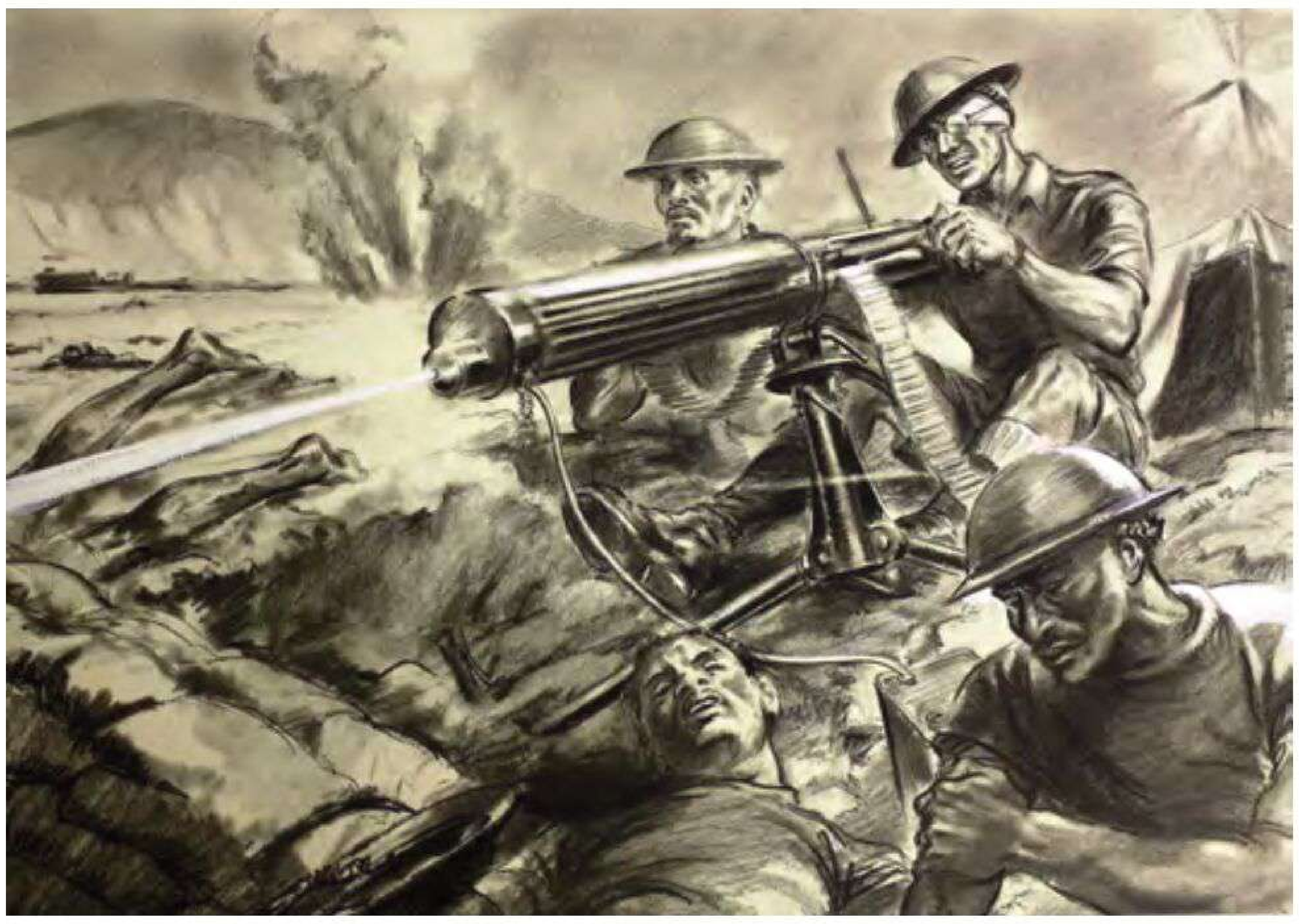
ITALIAN TROOPS INVADE EGYPT

General Sir Archibald Wavell, on the left, in discussion with James Roosevelt in early 1941. (Polish National Archives)

The Middle East Command was formed under General Sir Archibald Wavell in August 1939. Under Wavell's control were British and Commonwealth troops in Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, Cyprus, Kenya and, from early 1940, British Somaliland. At the outbreak of war, the entire command, spread across all these countries, consisted of just 21 battalions of infantry with only 64 field guns. Reinforcements were received from as early as September 1939, and were continually added to, these men coming predominantly from India, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Rhodesia, South Africa and even Malta, Mauritius and Poland.

It was truly a multi-national force that had been assembled and was as prepared as could be when Italy declared war on France and Britain in June 1940. What Wavell's mixed force faced were 215,000 Italian troops in Libya and over 200,000 in Italian East Africa. Though considerably outnumbered and ordered to undertake predominantly defensive measures, Wavell immediately went onto the offensive in the Western Desert, sending raids across the Egyptian border to target Italian positions in Libya.

General Wavell later detailed the first of these sorties: "On the night of 11/12th June the 11th Hussars crossed the frontier and captured a detachment of two Italian officers and 59 other ranks.



On August 3, 1940, Italian troops also invaded British Somaliland. During the subsequent fighting, Captain Eric Charles Twelves Wilson, attached to the Somaliland Camel Corps, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at the Battle of Tug Argan – depicted here. (Historic Military Press)

On 14th June, the enemy's two frontier forts at Capuzzo and Maddalena were attacked and captured by the 7th Hussars, 11th Hussars and a company of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, about 220 prisoners being captured.

"On 16th June a most successful action was fought by the 7th Hussars and 11th Hussars supported by a troop of 'J' Battery R.H.A. nine miles north of Sidi Omar. Twelve enemy tanks were destroyed, and a considerable number of the enemy killed and about 160 prisoners taken. Three guns and a number of lorries were also captured or destroyed. On the same day a troop of the 11th Hussars intercepted a convoy on the Tobruk–Bardia road, destroyed 30 lorries and captured a number of prisoners, including a general officer.

"Several other successful patrol actions were fought during the next few weeks. An operation to capture the Jerabub Oasis was planned for the beginning of July, but abandoned owing to great heat."

The Italians responded by despatching at least two divisions up towards the Egyptian border. "By 10th September," added Wavell, "it became obvious that an enemy advance across the frontier was imminent… On 13th September the enemy advance began, a large force being deployed under heavy artillery preparation against the escarpment above Sollum, which had for some time past been held only by a platoon and had by now been evacuated. At the same time another enemy column advanced on the Halfaya Pass down the escarpment towards Sollum. Both these columns were engaged by our artillery, which inflicted considerable losses on them."

The Italians pushed east along the coast as far as Sidi Barrani, where they halted on September 16 and dug in. In the course of their withdrawal, Wavell's men suffered less than 50 casualties.

THE CITY OF BENARES DISASTER

A survivor from the SS *City of Benares* pictured following her rescue. This is Mary Cornish, an accomplished classical pianist who had volunteered as a children's escort. (Historic Military Press)

The heightened threat of aerial attack on Britain following the start of the Blitzkrieg in May 1940, saw a renewed interest in the evacuation of children and the vulnerable from the nation's towns and cities. On May 31, the Canadian government became the first to offer refuge for British children, this being the result of the spontaneous generosity of ordinary citizens. In the days that followed, similar approaches were received from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States.

To coordinate the British side of the process, the government set up the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB). Its terms of reference were: "To consider offers from overseas to house and care for children, whether accompanied, from the European war zone, residing in Great Britain, including children orphaned by the war and to make recommendations thereon." Such was the response that in the first few months over 211,000 children had been registered for a place, whilst some 1,000 volunteer escorts, including doctors and nurses, had enrolled.

The first disaster to affect the CORB scheme occurred on August 30, 1940. Just before midnight, the SS *Volendam*, carrying 320 children with their escorts, was torpedoed by *U-60*. Remarkably, only one person, a member of the Dutch crew, was killed in the attack, with all of the evacuees being rescued. Among their number were Patricia Allen and Michael Booker. With their family homes having been destroyed, both youngsters were considered a priority for spaces on one of the next available sailings.

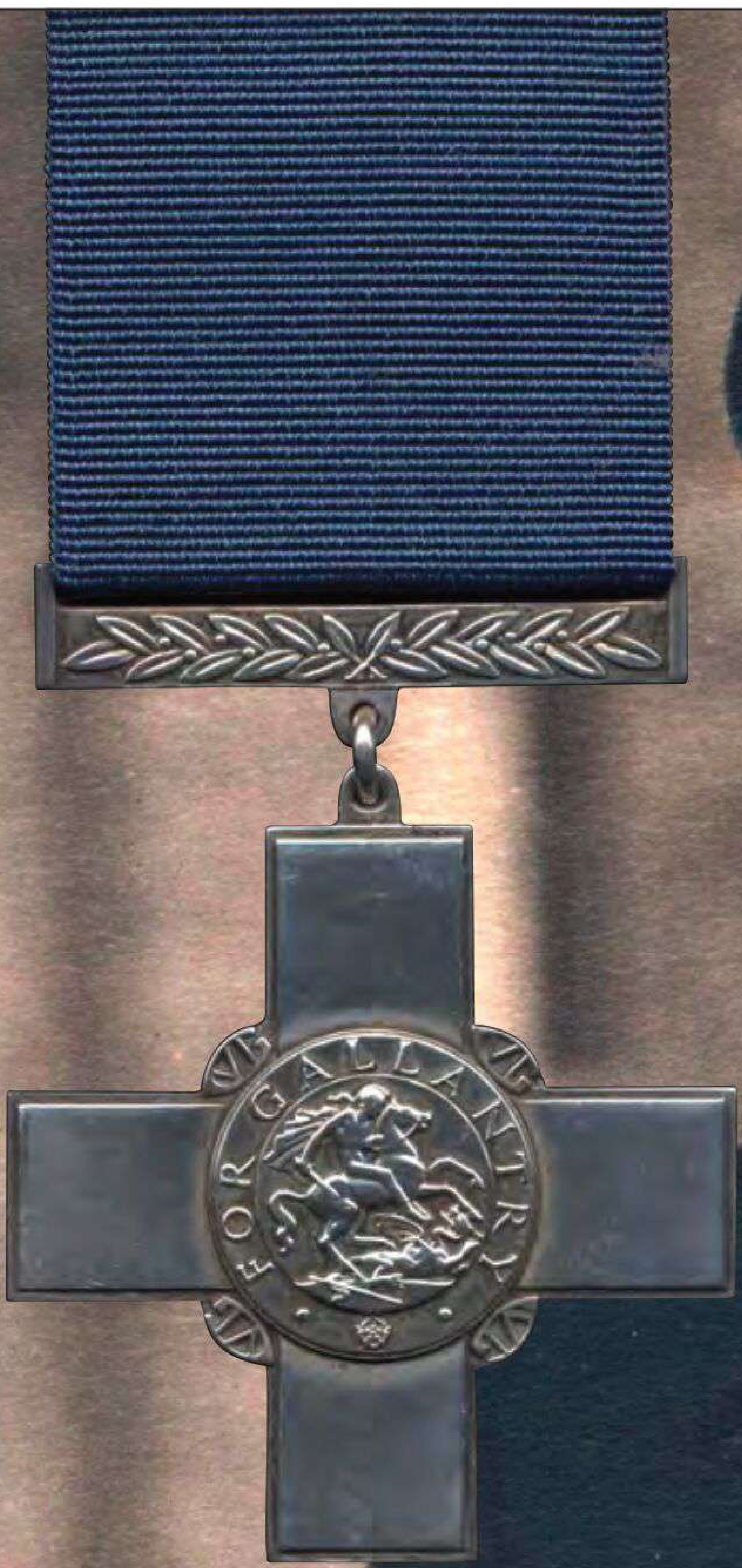
The two Sea Evacuees, or 'Seavacs' as they were often known, duly boarded the SS *City of Benares* along with 88 other evacuees bound for families in Canada. The liner sailed from Liverpool on September 13, 1940, as part of Convoy OB 213.

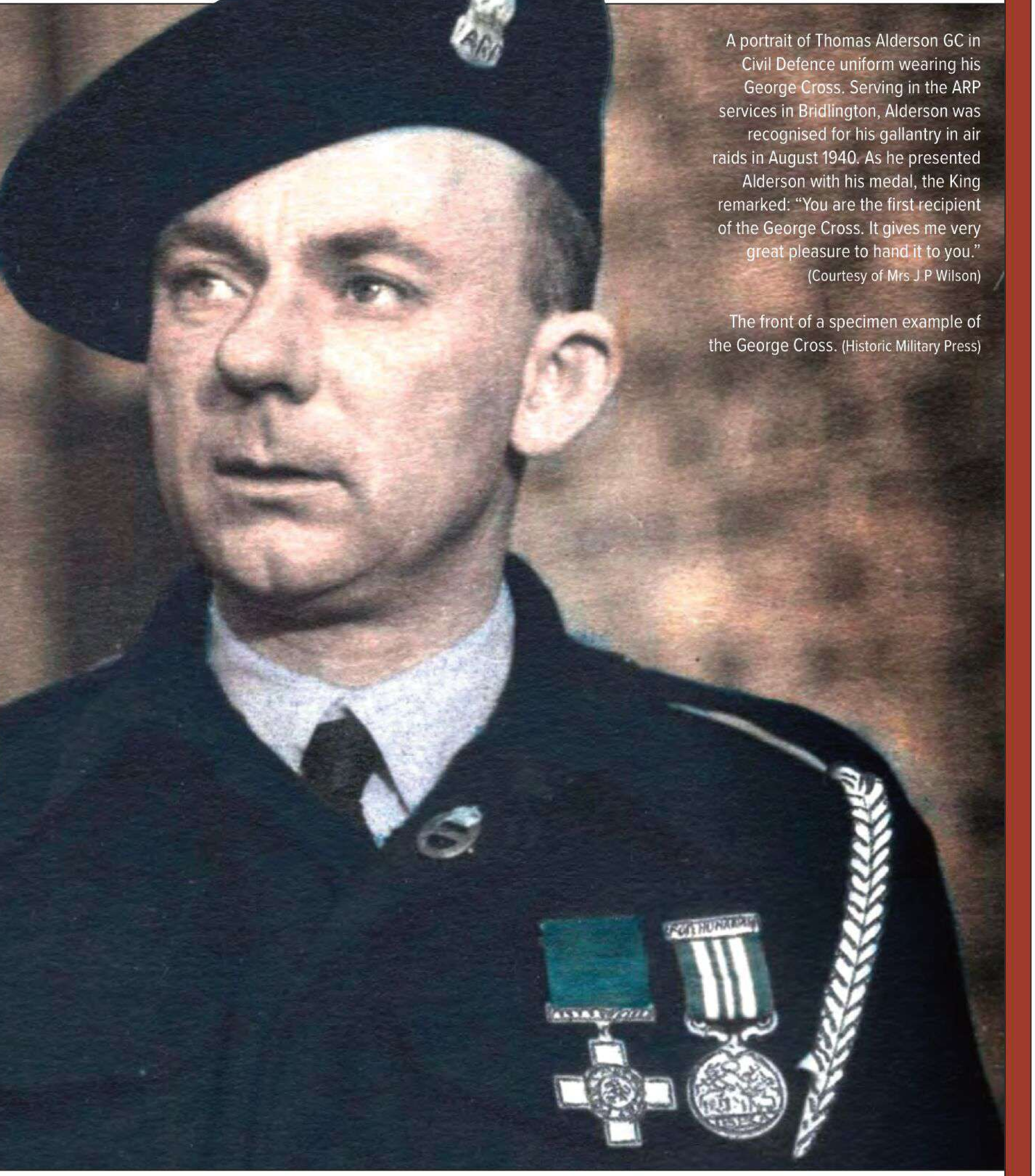
It was just after midnight on September 18, that disaster struck. After an initial pair of torpedoes fired by *U-48* had missed, her captain, Kapitänleutnant Heinrich Bleichrodt, ordered a third to be sent on its way. This time he did not miss, and the torpedo struck *City of Benares* in the stern.

Barbara Bech later recalled the moment: "I'd been reading in bed and I think I'd literally just put my bedside light out when I heard this thump and I thought 'Oh lord, what's that?'. I think it was a sort of double kind of bump bump and that was all. And then, after about a minute, the bells began to ring so then I shot across to Sonia's bed and shook her awake and said 'Sonia, come on, we've got to get up, something's happened'."

The liner sank in just 30 minutes. In total, 260 of the 407 people on board were lost. Only 13 of the 90 child evacuee passengers embarked survived the sinking. Among those who went down with the ship were Patricia Allen and Michael Booker. The consequences of the attack were devastating, even by wartime standards, and it marked the effective end of all overseas evacuation from Britain, both public and private.

This is believed to show Lifeboat 12, containing survivors from the sinking of the SS *City of Benares* in September 1940, at the time that its occupants were in the process of being rescued. (Historic Military Press)





A portrait of Thomas Alderson GC in Civil Defence uniform wearing his George Cross. Serving in the ARP services in Bridlington, Alderson was recognised for his gallantry in air raids in August 1940. As he presented Alderson with his medal, the King remarked: "You are the first recipient of the George Cross. It gives me very great pleasure to hand it to you." (Courtesy of Mrs J P Wilson)

The front of a specimen example of the George Cross. (Historic Military Press)

THE CIVILIAN VC

Until 1940, the Victoria Cross was the highest gallantry award that could be granted for acts of valour, but this was available only to members of the armed forces. The Empire Gallantry Medal was open to civilians, but it ranked lower than the VC, as did the Albert Medal and the Edward Medal.

With the Battle of Britain raging in the skies above the UK, and bombs raining down on its population following the start of the Blitz, it was clear that the Home Front had become as dangerous as the more traditional battlefields. A civilian was now as likely to distinguish themselves whilst "under fire" as a soldier, sailor or airman – though not necessarily in the "face of the enemy".

As no suitable decoration existed to recognise such acts and situations, King George VI decided to give his name to a new medal as "a new mark of honour for men and women in all walks of civilian life... [for] acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger". He added that, "The Cross is intended primarily for civilians and award in our military services is to be confined to actions for which purely military honours are not normally granted".

The George Cross, which soon became known affectionately as the "Civilian VC", was instituted on September 24, 1940. In announcing the new award, the King stated: "In order that they should be worthily and promptly recognised, I have decided to create, at once, a new mark of honour for men and women in all walks of civilian life. I propose to give my name to this distinction, which will consist of the George Cross, which will rank next to the Victoria Cross."

For his work in defusing an unexploded bomb at St Paul's Cathedral, Sapper George 'Jock' Wylie, seen here, was, along with his CO, Lieutenant Robert Davies, awarded the George Cross in September 1940. (Historic Military Press)

Though its Royal Warrant would not be published in *The London Gazette* until January 31, 1941, its wording included the following: "It is ordained that the Cross shall be awarded only for acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger."

Despite the fact that it was intended to be the "Civilian VC", 76 of the first 100 awards of the George Cross were actually to members of the armed forces, predominantly for their actions in undertaking bomb disposal work. A second new award, the George Medal, was instituted at the same time as the George Cross. It was, continued King George VI, intended "for wider distribution" than the more senior GC. It was "to be awarded to civilians for acts of great bravery, but not so outstanding as to merit consideration for the George Cross". The first awards of both medals were announced in *The London Gazette* of September 27, 1940.

Not only was Friday, September 27, 1940, the day that the Axis powers were formed, with Germany, Italy and Japan becoming allies following the signing of the Tripartite Pact in Berlin, it also saw, so it is stated, an historic gunfight on British soil.

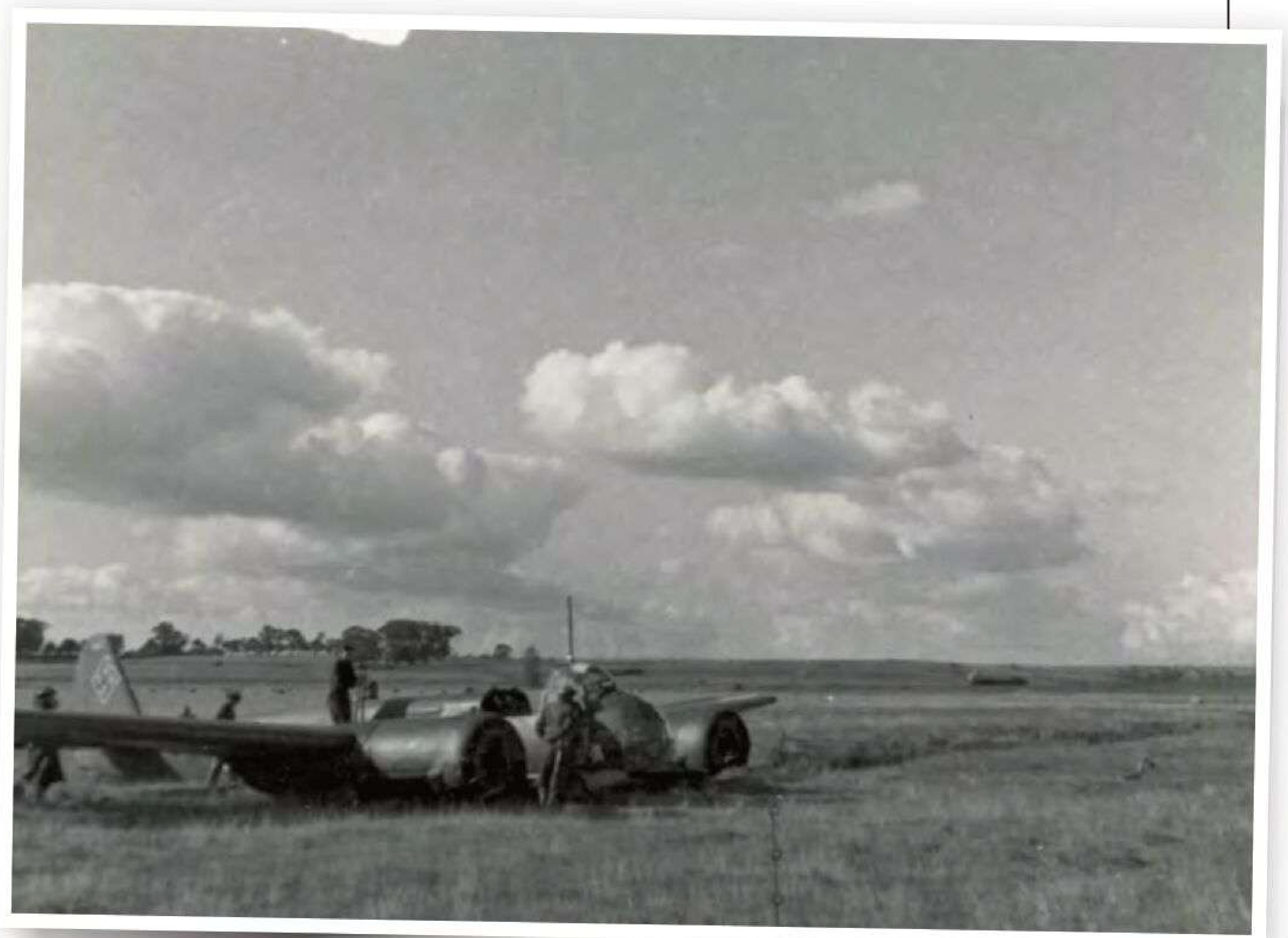
With the Battle of Britain still being played out in the skies over the UK, the Luftwaffe launched a series of heavy attacks on London. Many of the aircraft involved were shot down or turned back before reaching their targets. One of the former was the Junkers Ju 88A-1 flown by Unteroffizier Fritz Ruhlandt and his crew from 3/KG 77.

Hit by anti-aircraft fire over London, one of the bomber’s engines was put out of action and, having turned for home, Ruhlandt’s crew soon found themselves lagging behind the rest of their formation – at which point they were pounced on by three Spitfires over Faversham. As bullets tore into the aircraft, the remaining engine packed up.

Ruhlandt was fortunate to spot the wide, open stretches of Graveney Marsh ahead and, as he went down, skimming over Graveney Hill in his descent, he was able to bring the bomber to rest on the flat, soft ground. The propellers were torn off as the aircraft skidded to a halt, ripping apart the tailplanes and elevators, but otherwise the Junkers was largely intact. Its crash-landing was timed at 15.58 hours.

With a number of conflicting accounts, exactly what happened next is unclear, though with at least one of their number wounded, the Luftwaffe crew abandoned their aircraft. It is likely that Ruhlandt and his men then attempted to destroy it, possibly even opening fire on it with a machine-gun taken from the cockpit.

Already closing in on the downed bomber were men from ‘A’ Company, 1st Battalion London Irish Rifles, who were billeted nearby in the Sportsman Inn at Graveney. Hearing gunfire, the riflemen advanced swiftly from dyke to dyke, employing “fire with movement on the flat and open ground” notes the regimental history. As one group of five men pushed forward, a second provided covering fire. As bullets crashed into those parts of the Ju 88’s canopy still in situ, “heavy return fire came from the bomber”.

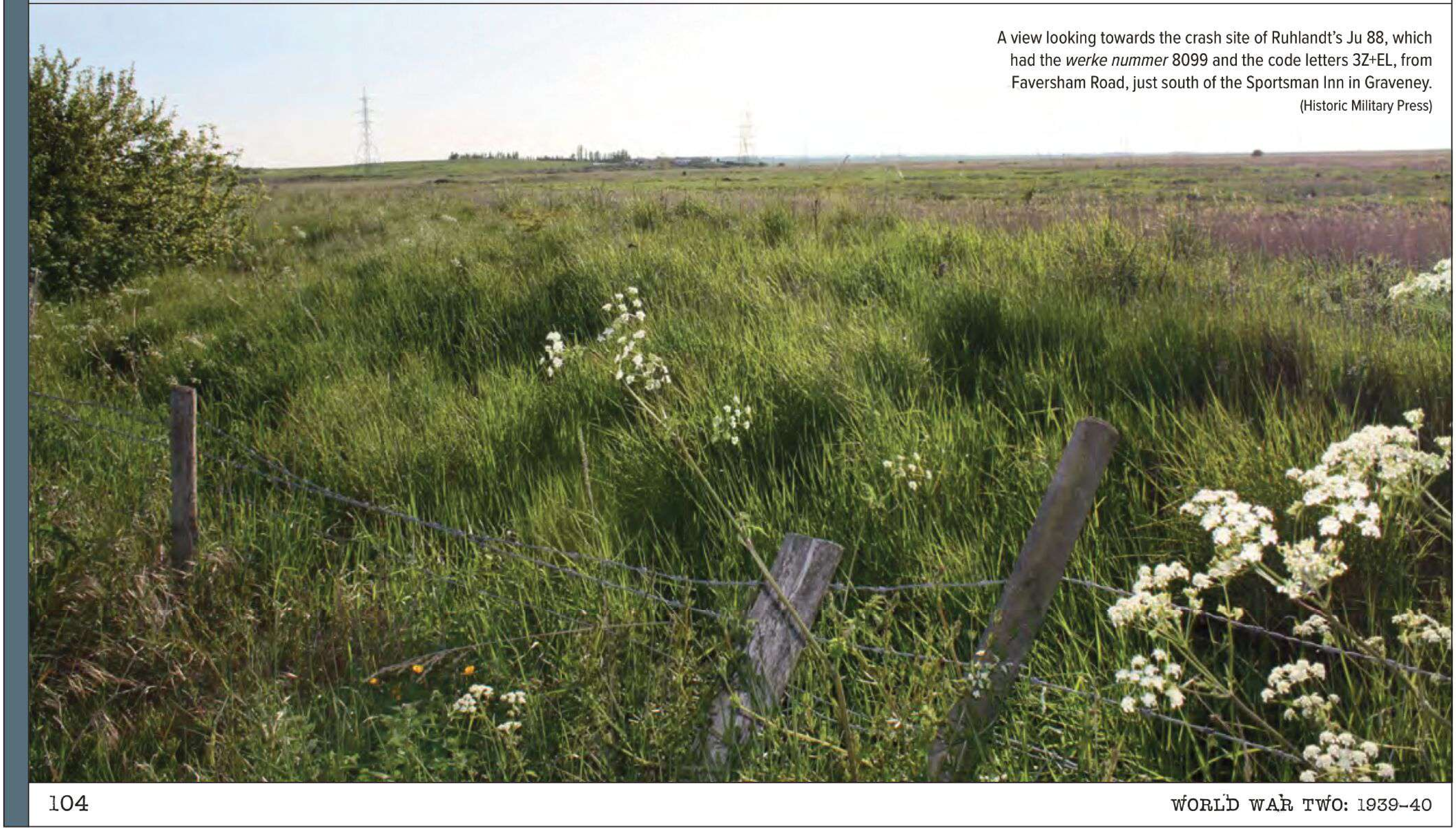


The Junkers Ju 88A-1 flown by Unteroffizier Fritz Ruhlandt being guarded at the isolated crash site on the Graveney Marshes in Kent. (Courtesy of the Andy Saunders Collection)

Eventually, under fire from two sides, outnumbered and with three of the airmen wounded – Ruhlandt had been injured in the foot during the shooting on the ground – the Germans surrendered. Of the Junkers’ crew, only Unteroffizier Gotthardt Richter was uninjured by the end of the incident.

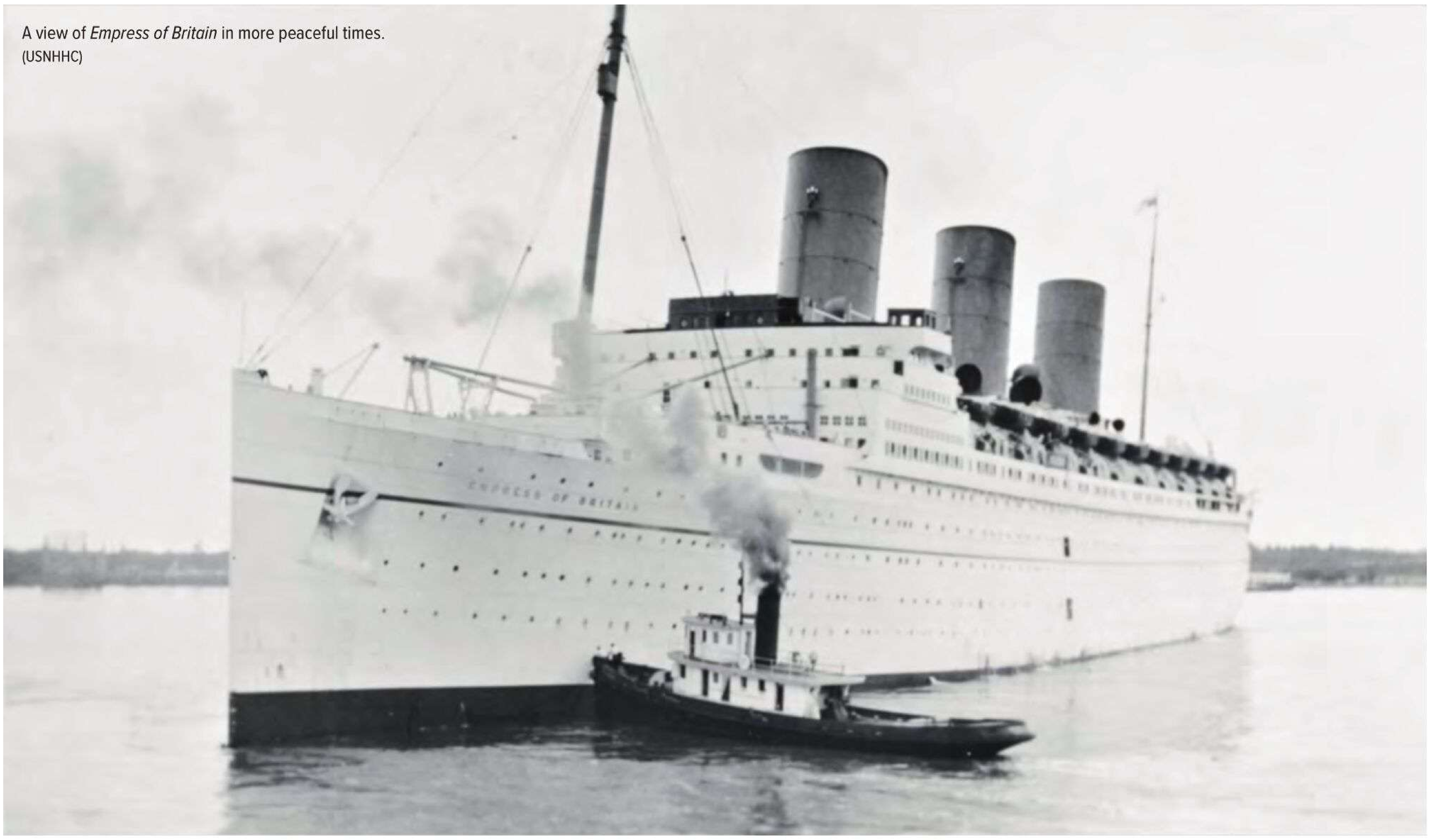
Though the action near the Sportsman Inn at Graveney is often said to have been the last armed conflict on British soil since the failed French invasion of 1797, in that particular engagement, the so-called Battle of Fishguard, the French surrendered without firing a shot. So, if both sides had indeed fired at each other that afternoon in 1940, then the skirmish in the marsh would be the last genuine military combat since Bonny Prince Charlie’s defeat at Culloden in 1746.

THE ‘BATTLE OF GRAVENEY MARSH’



A view looking towards the crash site of Ruhlandt’s Ju 88, which had the *werke nummer* 8099 and the code letters 3Z+EL, from Faversham Road, just south of the Sportsman Inn in Graveney. (Historic Military Press)

LINER EMPRESS OF BRITAIN SUNK



A view of *Empress of Britain* in more peaceful times. (USNHHC)

In her time, *Empress of Britain* was the epitome of luxury. The outbreak of World War Two, however, saw her requisitioned by the Admiralty for service as a troopship and, with a top speed of 24 knots *Empress of Britain* would be able to sail by herself, unencumbered by a slower convoy.

On October 26, 1940, the former liner was returning from South Africa. As well as the passengers on board, she was carrying a cargo of 300 tons of sugar and 300 tons of government stores, the latter including an unspecified quantity of gold. At 09.20 hours, when she was little more than 60 miles from the north-west coast of Ireland, *Empress of Britain* was spotted by the crew of Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor of 1./KG 40.

The sighting was highly fortunate for Jope as there was low, dense cloud over the sea. He took the Condor down to about 300 feet and ran towards the ship from astern, dropping a 250kg bomb. The anti-aircraft gunners on *Empress of Britain* returned fire, hitting the raider. Jope, however, pulled round to circle the ship for a second attack. Once more, the Condor approached from astern – and again the bombs missed.

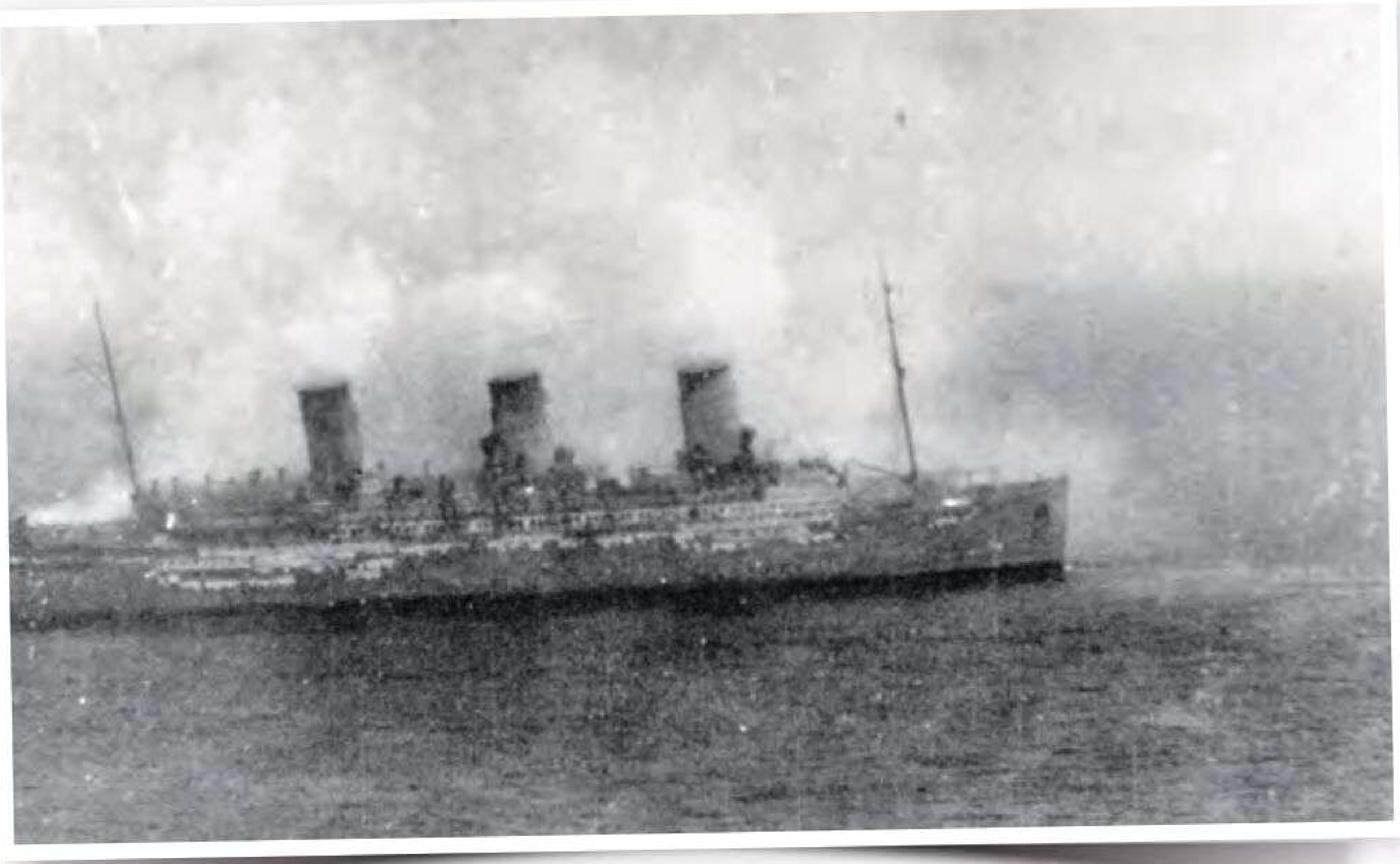
Jope then turned to attack from ahead. He released two more bombs; one hit the deck but failed to explode, rolling off into the sea. The other exploded on the open promenade deck behind the third funnel, starting a fire. A member of the crew, J P Donovan, watched the disaster unfold: “When the bombs began to drop, about 40 or 50 of us lay down on the deck. Then the lights went out in the forward part and we made our way towards the forecastle by torchlight. The stench left by the bombs was terrible.”

Lieutenant Commander Charles Garrett recalled the following: “My gun crew opened fire almost simultaneously with the first bomb... I left D deck, ran the main staircase and found a fire raging on the lounge deck. The lights had gone out. There were several further explosions about this time.”

Such was the scale of the damage from Jope's bombs that Captain Charles Sapworth ordered *Empress of Britain* to be abandoned at 09.50 hours. Just 20 minutes had passed since the first bomb had struck.

Although it had been abandoned, the liner was still afloat. The destroyers that had quickly arrived on the scene were then joined by two tugs, *Thames* and *Marauder*, which began to tow the ship towards Greenock at a steady four knots, the destroyers providing an escort.

Then, at around 01.50 hours on October 28, the liner was spotted by *U-32*. The latter fired two torpedoes. One malfunctioned, exploding prematurely. The other missed. Though the explosion denounced the submarine's presence, a third torpedo was then fired. This one struck the liner amidships and exploded. Just nine minutes later *Empress of Britain* slipped beneath the waves. She was the largest British merchant ship to be sunk during World War Two.



A view of *Empress of Britain* on fire after being bombed by Oberleutnant Jope's Focke-Wulf Fw 200. A Coastal Command Short Sunderland, P9622 captained by Flight Lieutenant Craven, directed destroyers to the scene. (Historic Military Press)

"The most critical stage of the Battle occurred in the third phase," wrote Dowding in his despatch in 1941. "On the 15th September the Germans delivered their maximum effort, when our guns and fighters together accounted for 185 aircraft."

By undertaking its largest and most concentrated attack against London so far, Göring was still hoping to draw Fighter Command into his much-vaunted battle of annihilation. Some 1,500 aircraft were involved in the running air battles which lasted until dusk, following which the RAF claimed what they believed to be a decisive victory over the Luftwaffe. For this reason, the 15th was officially named Battle of Britain Day – and is still celebrated as such this day. Four days later Hitler postponed Operation *Sealion*.

The Battle of Britain continued to be played out in the skies over Britain for a few weeks, not officially ending until October 31. "What the Luftwaffe failed to do was to destroy the Fighter Squadrons of the Royal Air Force," Dowding concluded, "which were, indeed, stronger at the end of the battle than at the beginning… This statement, even if intended only for popular consumption, tends to lead to an attitude of complacency which may be very dangerous in the future.

"Whatever the study of paper returns may have shown, the fact is that the situation was critical in the extreme. Pilots had to be withdrawn from the Bomber and Coastal Commands and from the Fleet Air Arm and flung into the Battle after hasty preparation. The majority of the squadrons had been reduced to the status of training units, and were fit only for operations against unescorted bombers. The remainder were battling daily against heavy odds. [However] the indomitable courage of the fighter pilots and the skill of their leaders brought us through the crises, and the morale of the Germans eventually cracked because of the stupendous losses which they sustained."

In his official history, Denis Richards noted that "the Battle of Britain has often been compared with the Battle of the Marne" of World War One. He did, however, elaborate on the differences: "The Marne was a miracle of good fortune born of the enemy's mistakes, and incredible victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. The Battle of Britain, on the other hand, was the result of years of careful thought and scientific preparation. It was the testing time of the whole British system of air defence – the radar stations and the observer posts, the pip-squeak and the R/T, the balloons and the guns, the Spitfires and the Hurricanes."

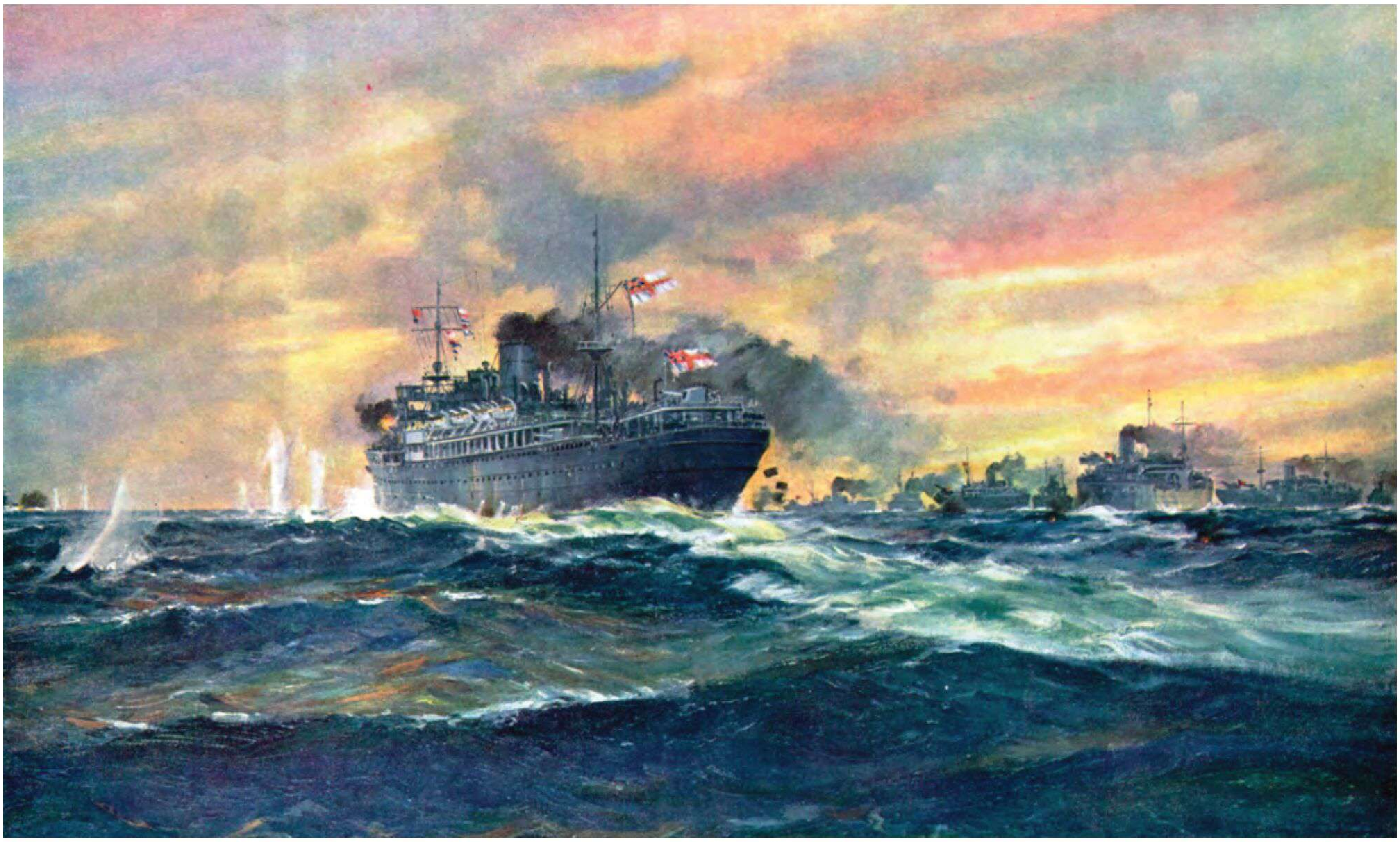
One of the Luftwaffe losses on September 15, 1940. Pictured at the front of Victoria Station, this is the wreckage of the Dornier Do 17Z which was brought down by Sergeant Ray Holmes of 504 Squadron. (Historic Military Press)

The RAF's victory also had a big impact on galvanising support for the UK among many in the United States. After returning home from Britain in late 1940, the American journalist Ralph Ingersoll wrote that in The Battle of Britain "Adolf Hitler met his first defeat in eight years". He concluded that it might "go down in history as a battle as important as Waterloo or Gettysburg".

THE END OF THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

The Foxley-Norris Memorial Wall at The Wing in Kent. Named in honour of the late Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris, a Hurricane fighter pilot in 1940, the wall carries the name of all those who flew as part of The Few in the Battle of Britain. (Historic Military Press)

JERVIS BAY VC ACTION



The armed merchant cruiser HMS *Jervis Bay* in action on November 5, 1940 – note the shells from the German pocket-battleship *Admiral Scheer* falling around the former liner. (Historic Military Press)

On the afternoon of November 5, 1940, Convoy HX-84 was in mid-Atlantic, homeward bound from Halifax to the United Kingdom. The 37 ships were disposed in nine columns, with the convoy's sole escort, HMS *Jervis Bay*, a 14,000-ton armed merchant cruiser, in the centre of the convoy.

Commanded by Captain Edward Fegen, *Jervis Bay's* only means of defence came from eight 6-inch breech-loading guns, supplemented with light anti-aircraft weapons. The convoy was sailing at a steady nine knots when Captain Fegen sighted a light smudge on the horizon. Fegen was unaware that it was the German raider *Admiral Scheer* which was bearing down on the convoy.

A challenge was duly signalled to the approaching ship. The response was a salvo fired from the *Admiral Scheer*'s guns. "It was a sunny evening when we picked up the battleship on the port side at 4.50 on November 5," wrote one of *Jervis Bay*'s crew. "She opened fire first and closed to get into range. We closed, too, leaving the convoy. I think everybody on board was proud as our ship turned towards the enemy. Our captain knew just what we were going to get, but it did not matter."

The merchant cruiser was hopelessly outgunned and outranged. She stood no chance of defeating or even disabling the powerful German warship, but Fegen was determined to protect the defenceless ships of the convoy.

Another member of the armed merchant cruiser's crew, Sub-Lieutenant J G Sergeant recalled that, "The raider fired two salvos, missing us. A third salvo hit us forward and carried away one gun. At the same time I went below, but I was told the bridge was blown away. Then the ship was handled from the aft control."

The heavy German shells had a devastating effect upon *Jervis Bay*, yet her gunners continued to fire, forcing the *Admiral Scheer*'s captain to confront the threat. Over the next 30 minutes *Jervis Bay* sustained repeated shelling, which in the main was concentrated on the engine room and the bridge. Even though *Jervis Bay* was eventually holed below the waterline and was listing to one side, her guns kept firing and still she continued to draw the enemy fire, enabling the rest of the convoy to make its escape.

"There she rode like a hero," recalled Captain Sven Olander of the Swedish freighter *Stureholm*. "She was right into the guns of the battleship. She didn't stand a chance and we all knew it; but there she stayed to the last to give us in the merchant ships a chance to run for it." *Jervis Bay* was last seen by the convoy at about 19.00 hours, burning but still afloat. She finally sank by the stern an hour later.

Captain Fegen was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross on November 22, 1940, "for valour in challenging hopeless odds and giving his life to save the many ships it was his duty to protect". It was the only VC awarded for convoy defence during World War Two.

The pocket-battleship *Admiral Scheer*, seen here in Gibraltar in 1936. Having completed a refit and modifications, *Admiral Scheer* sailed on her first war patrol on October 14, 1940. (USNHHC)

The principal Italian naval bases in the Mediterranean in 1940 were located at Taranto, Genoa, La Spezia and Trieste. It was to Taranto that Admiral Inigo Campioni's fleet had steamed after the Battle of Calabria.

Situated in the 'instep' of Italy, Taranto was close to Britain's stronghold of Malta, provided the shortest mainland shipping route to Axis forces in North Africa, and, most importantly of all, was best-placed to threaten convoys travelling through the Mediterranean as well as the British fleet's base at Alexandra. It was a threat that Cunningham decided to challenge. "If they won't come out of Taranto", he declared, "we shall blast them out!"

Fairey Swordfish ranged on the deck of HMS *Illustrious*. (Courtesy of the Fleet Air Arm Museum)

As warships could not hope to force their way into Taranto's heavily-defended outer harbour undetected, the decision was taken that the attack would be delivered from the air – by the Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm. For the raid, it was agreed that a total of 30 aircraft from both of Cunningham's carriers would be used; by this time *Eagle* had been reinforced by the arrival of HMS *Illustrious*. These were the Swordfish of 815 and 819 Naval Air Squadrons, operating from *Illustrious*, and 813 and 824 Naval Air Squadrons from *Eagle*. The Fairey Fulmars of 806 Naval Air Squadron would provide fighter cover.

After a series of delays, under the codename Operation *Judgement* the attack on Taranto was scheduled to take place on the night of November 11-12, 1940. Then disaster struck when Cunningham lost half of his carrier force, *Eagle* being struck down by mechanical failures. Deciding that he could not abandon his plans, six aircraft were transferred to *Illustrious* and, on November 6, the single carrier sailed from Alexandria supported by four battleships, *Warspite*, *Ramillies*, *Valiant* and *Malaya*, plus four cruisers and four destroyers.

At 18.00 hours on November 11, Cunningham ordered *Illustrious* to proceed with her escorts to the attack point just 170 miles from Taranto. As the ships parted company, Cunningham sent the following message to Admiral Lyster on *Illustrious*: "Good luck, then, to your lads in their enterprise. Their success may have an important bearing on the course of the war in the Mediterranean". At 20.30 hours that day, Captain Denis Boyd turned *Illustrious* into the wind and the first Swordfish lifted off the flight deck into the night sky. Of the 21 Swordfish available after the withdrawal of *Eagle*, ten would be loaded with bombs and flares, the remainder with torpedoes.

The first wave of 12 aircraft encountered thick fog and the formation broke up. In small groups or individually, the Swordfish made their way to Taranto, navigation being helped by the port's anti-aircraft guns were firing on a Sunderland flying boat.

After dropping their 16 marker flares at about 8,000 feet, two

OPERATION JUDGEMENT

Swordfish K8393 was the aircraft flown by Captain Oliver Patch during the raid on Taranto. For his part in the raid, Patch was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross. (Courtesy of the Fleet Air Arm Museum)

K
8393
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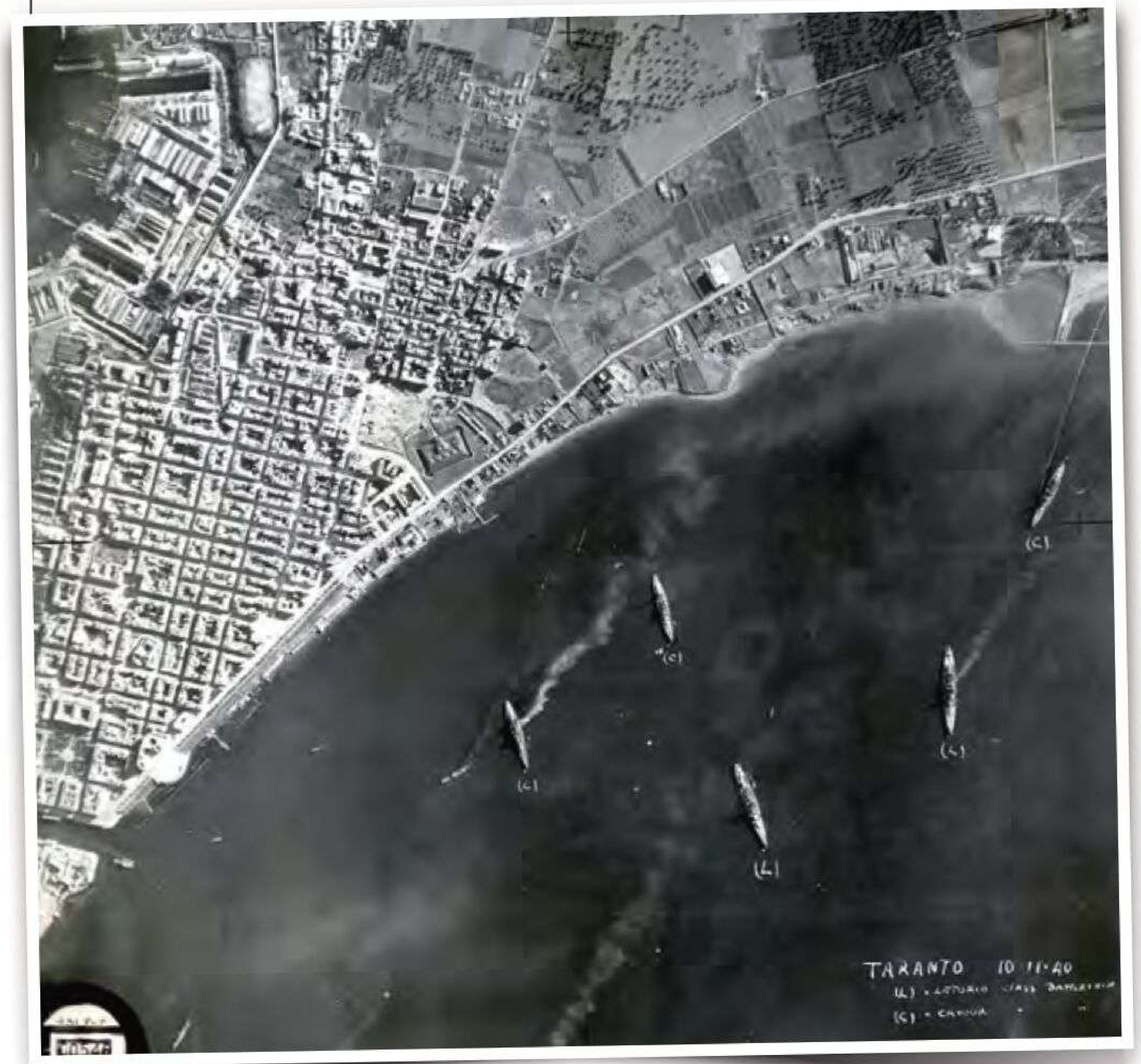
K8393

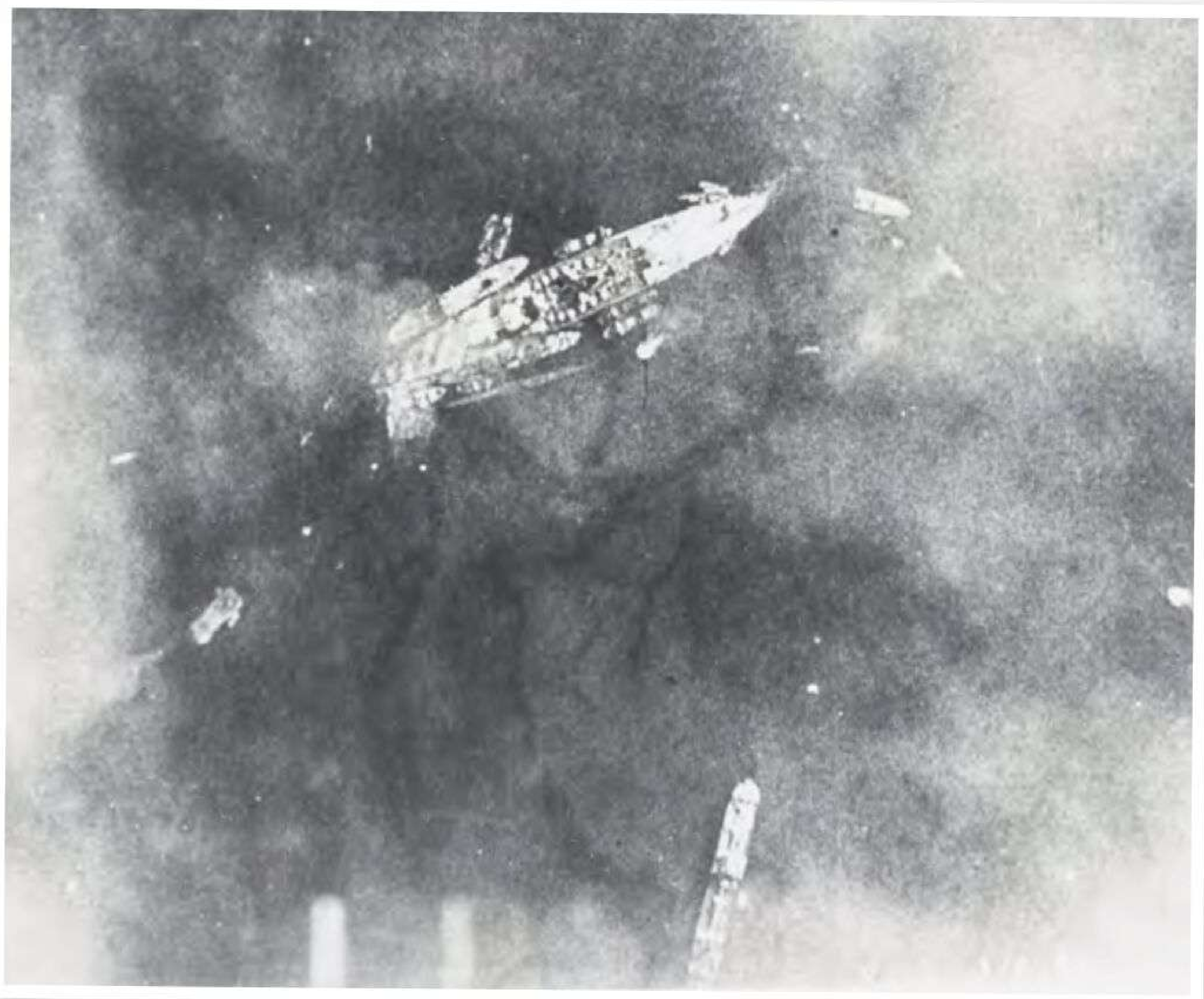


A reconnaissance photograph of Taranto taken on November 10, 1940. Note how the two Littorio-class (*Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio*) and three Conte di Cavour-class battleships are marked. The photography of Taranto was undertaken by RAF Martin Marylands based at Malta. (Courtesy of the Fleet Air Arm Museum)

'pathfinder' Swordfish also bombed the port's fuel storage tanks. Then torpedo bombers led by Lieutenant Commander K 'Hooch' Williamson of 815 Naval Air Squadron arrived on the scene. Williamson later recalled the view that greeted him: "There suddenly appeared ahead the most magnificent firework display I had ever seen. The whole area was full of red and blue bullets. They appeared to approach very slowly until they were just short of the aircraft, then suddenly accelerated and whistled past."

Dropping down to around 30 feet, Williamson released his torpedo towards one of the Italian ships and then turned quickly to avoid the heavy anti-aircraft fire. As the Swordfish banked, a wingtip touched the water and the biplane crashed into the harbour; Williamson and navigator, Lieutenant Norman Scarlett, managed to swim to shore and were taken prisoner. But their torpedo had found its mark, hitting the battleship *Conte di Cavour*, herself a veteran of the Battle of Calabria.

The other Swordfish swooped low over the harbour. Two aircraft released their torpedoes towards the towering outline of the battleship *Littorio*. Both struck home, causing her to slump down by her bows into the water.



The battleship *Littorio* (later renamed *Italia*) pictured surrounded by salvage vessels following the Taranto Raid on 11-12 November 1940. She is down by the head and in the outer harbour. (USNHHC)

Finally, the last of the torpedo-carrying Swordfish commenced its attack. Lieutenant M R Maund spotted another of the battleships: "We turn until the right-hand battleship is between the bars of the torpedo sight, dropping down as we do so. The water is close beneath our wheels, so close I am wondering which is to happen first – the torpedo going or our hitting the sea – then we level out, and almost without thought the button is pressed and a jerk tells me the 'fish' is gone."

The torpedo headed towards *Vittorio Veneto*, but ran aground in the shallow water of the harbour. This battleship survived the raid unscathed.

Behind the torpedo Swordfish came the bombers. Diving down from over 8,000 feet, Captain Oliver Patch led his flight of four bombers through the smoke of the torpedo strikes and the hail of anti-aircraft fire, aiming for the cruisers and destroyers berthed in the inner harbour.

Meanwhile, the second wave of Swordfish had begun to prepare for take-off as soon as the first wave had been launched. It took almost an hour before the aircraft were ready and then, once again, *Illustrious* turned into the wind.

As the second wave approached Taranto the fog that had disrupted the previous wave had dispersed. Once again, 'pathfinder' aircraft dropped their flares, illuminating the harbour even more.

NEXT STOP TARANTO

Bombs laid out on the flight deck of HMS *Illustrious* in preparation for the attack. Note how the one nearest the camera has the message "Next Stop Taranto" chalked on it. (Courtesy of the Fleet Air Arm Museum)

HMS *Illustrious* anchored in Alexandria. The lead-ship of a class of four aircraft carriers, and the fourth Royal Navy ship to carry the name, HMS *Illustrious* was laid down in April 1937 in response to the increasing threat of war. (Historic Military Press)

The torpedo Swordfish again struck with devastating effect. *Littorio* was hit for a third time and the battleship *Caio Duilio* was struck and damaged. The bombers also had some success when the cruiser *Trento* was hit by a bomb, though it passed straight through the ship without exploding.

In the course of little more than a couple of hours the Fleet Air Arm had inflicted more damage on an enemy fleet than any previous engagement by the Royal Navy so far in the war. Three Italian battleships had been sunk or damaged. Three cruisers and two destroyers had been badly damaged, as well as two fleet auxiliaries. The seaplane base and the oil storage tanks had been hit; they were still burning the following morning.

During the 12th, the Regia Marina transferred its undamaged ships from Taranto to Naples to protect them from similar attacks. All this was achieved by just 42 men flying 21 obsolete biplanes.

A view of Coventry after the passing of the German bombers during the Blitz. (Historic Military Press)

THE DESTRUCTION OF COVENTRY

Following its initial onslaught on the evening of September 7, 1940, night after night the Luftwaffe returned to batter London. However, the bombing, no matter how devastating and relentless it was, had not broken the will of the capital's residents – though no one would doubt what they were enduring. At the same time, Göring's fighters were failing to bring Fighter Command to its knees. It was against this background that, on September 19, Hitler postponed plans for the invasion of Britain – indefinitely as it turned out.

For the remainder of October, the Luftwaffe started to despatch such aircraft as could be spared from its battle of attrition against Britain's capital on the longer-term mission of striking at industry. "The character of raiding changed," noted one official account, *Front Line 1940-1941*, "and attacks on the provincial cities moved from the margin to the centre of the picture. London had failed to yield quick results; and the German Air Force, well exercised over the Thames, was becoming proficient enough in the once despised art of night bombing to undertake attacks on smaller and more elusive targets than the sprawling capital. There was to be no knock-out blow – that was clear. But the enemy may have still thought it possible to achieve the same ultimate result, given time, by striking intermittently at industrial centres and ports."

As a result, in the weeks and months that followed, Goring's bombers ranged far and wide across the United Kingdom. These new tactics, targeting the nation's industrial centres and port cities, were inaugurated by the infamous raid on Coventry on the night of November 14, 1940.

Winston Churchill walking through the ruined nave of Coventry Cathedral, destroyed during Operation *Mondscheinsonate*, on September 28, 1941. (Library of Congress)

For their attack, the raiders were led by 13 specially modified Heinkel He 111s of Kampfgruppe 100, which were equipped with X-Gerät navigational devices, these being a subsequent and more accurate development of the *Knickebein* system. These aircraft dropped their marker flares at 19.20 hours, pointing the way for Luftflotte 3's force of 515 bombers.

Codenamed Operation *Mondscheinsonate* ('Moonlight Sonata'), the intention was to destroy Coventry's factories and industrial infrastructure, though it was inevitable that the rest of Coventry was liable to be severely damaged. Throughout the course of the raid, the Germans dropped about 500 tonnes of high explosives and 36,000 incendiary bombs.

One woman was on her way home that evening when the air raid siren sounded: "Within minutes all hell was let loose – bombs whistling and falling, fires starting, buildings rocking and crashing down all around – and a policeman blowing his whistle and shouting urgently 'Take cover, take cover – get off the streets, get off the streets'."

By the time the last of the bombers departed the next morning, a total of 568 people had been killed and around 1,000 injured. More than 41,000 houses were damaged. Delighted with the destruction the Luftwaffe had caused, the German propaganda ministry coined a new word – 'Coventrieren' or to 'Coventrate'. It is a verb that, most dictionary definitions agree, means to "devastate by heavy bombing".

OPERATION COMPASS

With the Italians having dug in at Sidi Barrani, Wavell immediately turned his attention to removing them from Egypt. “About the middle of October,” he subsequently wrote, “when the enemy had been stationary for a month and there seemed no immediate probability of his further advance, I began to consider the possibility of an early offensive action in spite of our numerical inferiority.”

That offensive, Operation *Compass*, was initially scheduled to take place in the last week of November 1940. However, delays in the preparations and resupply, as well as the Italian invasion of Greece (which began on October 28), forced a postponement. “Although our forces were numerically inferior to those of the enemy,” continued Wavell, “their morale, training and equipment was believed to be sufficiently high to compensate for this. The enemy had so far shown little enterprise or power of manoeuvre.” Nevertheless, on November 28, Wavell wrote the following to Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the commander of British troops in Egypt: “I do not entertain extravagant hopes of this operation, but I do wish to make certain that if a big opportunity occurs we are prepared morally, mentally and administratively to use it to the fullest.”

On the night of December 7-8, the units assigned to *Compass* moved forward over the desert. Owing to good training and discipline, this manoeuvre was made without difficulty. Throughout December 8, the men remained in the desert, expecting an attack by the Regia Aeronautica Italiana, but none materialised. During the following night the force moved forward again, also without a hitch, and took up its positions for the next day’s assault.

The offensive began at 07.00 hours on December 9, with the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade and 7th Battalion RTR attacking an Italian camp at Nibeiwa that was reported to have been held by some 3,000 men under the command of General Pietro Maletti. “During a short bombardment” continued Wavell, “the 7th RTR moved forward and entered the perimeter at 0735 hours. They soon destroyed the enemy tanks and then met an extremely hot fire from artillery and weapons of all descriptions. This the heavy armour of the infantry tanks resisted, to the surprise and demoralisation of the enemy. The leading infantry battalion, 2nd Cameron Highlanders, advanced in MT [motor transport] behind the tanks to within 700 yards of the perimeter, where they debussed and entered the camp.”

The Italian defence ended at 08.30 hours. Along with 818 of his men, General Maletti was killed in the fighting. Approximately 2,000 Italian and Libyan soldiers were taken prisoner – all for just 56 British casualties.

Turning the tables on the Italians, the Allied offensive gained momentum. By nightfall on December 10, Sidi Barrani was back in British hands. In the days and weeks that followed, the offensive turned into a pursuit – the “big opportunity” that Wavell had optimistically referred to. Rather than lasting a matter of days, *Compass* raged on into February 1941 and saw the capture of large swathes of Italian territory.

Pictured on December 16, 1940, the crew of a Universal Carrier pause on their way to the forward area in the Western Desert to look at a monument erected by the Italians to commemorate their capture of Sidi Barrani a few months previous.

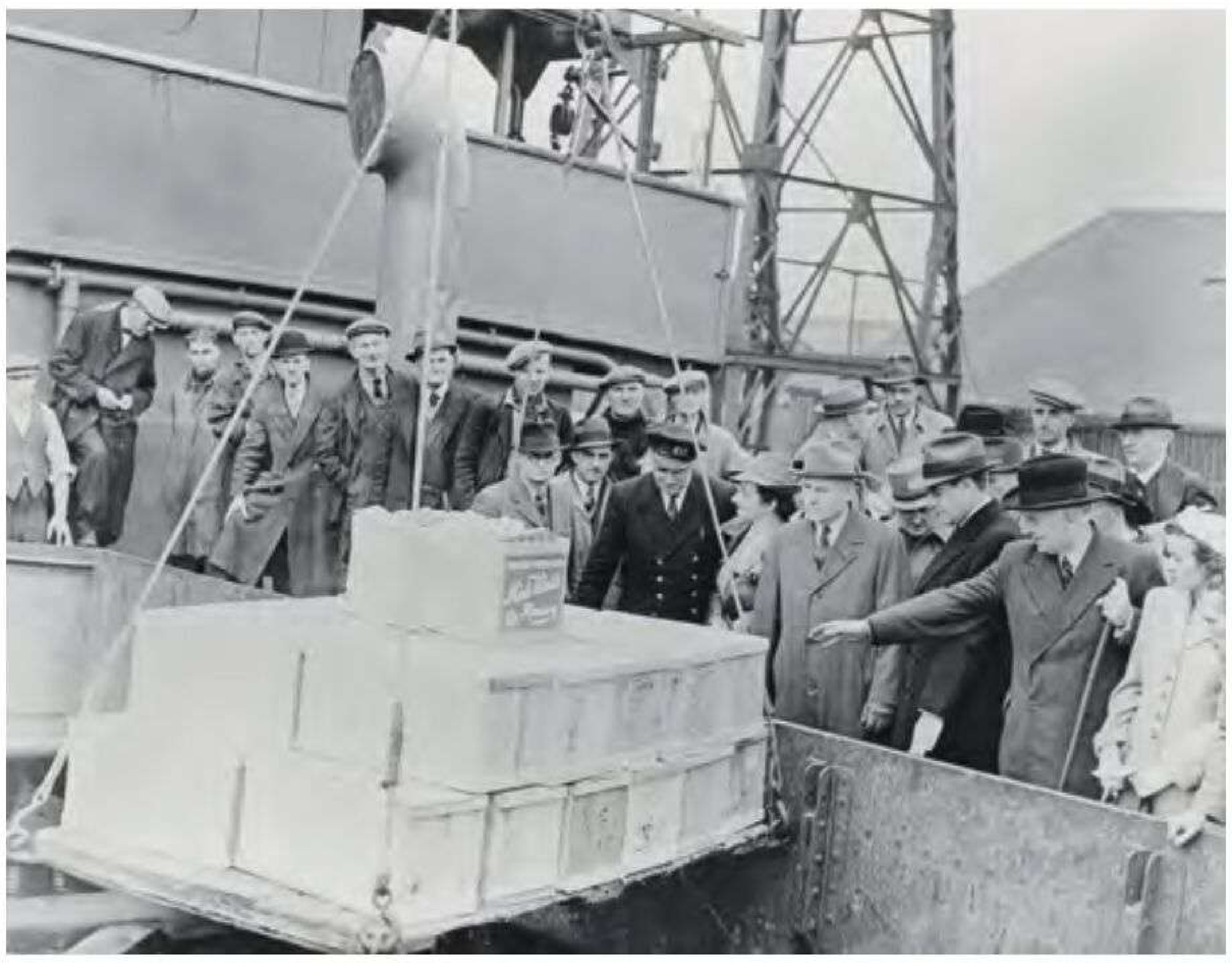
Led by a Universal Carrier, a column of Italian prisoners heads off into captivity, circa 1940. (Danish National Archives)

LEND-LEASE PROPOSAL

In December 1940, Churchill warned Roosevelt that the British Government would increasingly struggle to pay for the huge amounts of materiel that it needed to sustain its war effort. The 'Destroyers for Bases' agreement that was signed in early September 1940 had been a helpful step, but, the Prime Minister pointed out, more of the same would be needed in the months and years to come.

Roosevelt was undoubtedly sympathetic to the United Kingdom's situation. As part of his efforts to help, on December 17, 1940, notes the US Government's Office of the Historian, "President Roosevelt proposed a new initiative that would be known as Lend-Lease. The United States would provide Great Britain with the supplies it needed to fight Germany, but would not insist upon being paid immediately. Instead, the United States would 'lend' the supplies to the British, deferring payment. When payment eventually did take place, the emphasis would not be on payment in dollars."

Churchill later referred to the initiative, which was finalised in 1941, as "the most unsordid act" one nation had ever done for another. From Roosevelt's point of view, whilst Lend-Lease would undoubtedly help in the defeat of Germany, it also greatly strengthened America's industrial might – a point he eluded to in a radio address that was broadcast on December 29, 1940. "This is not a fireside chat on war," he declared. "It is a talk on national security."



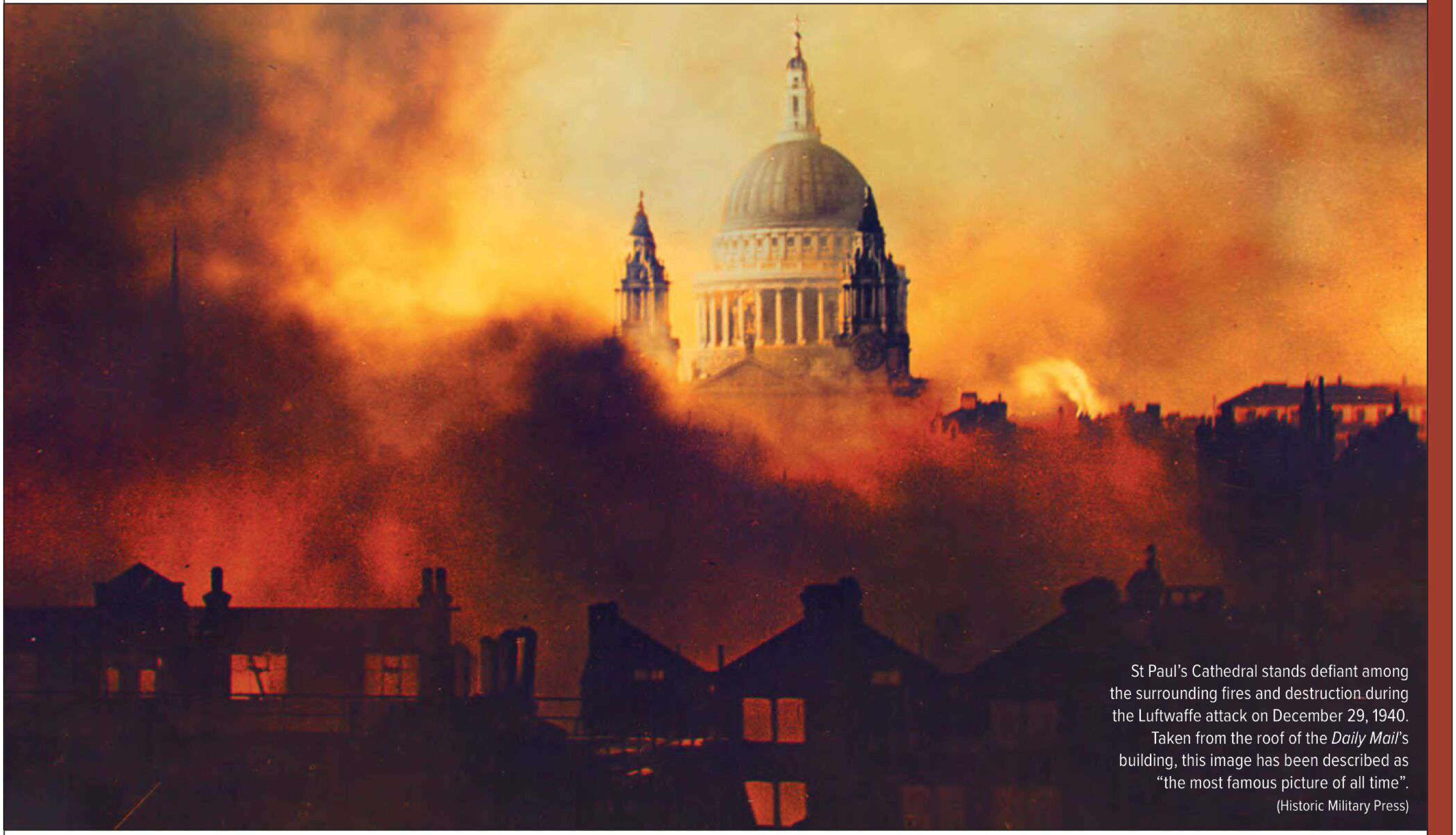
Among the earliest of the Lend-Lease shipments to reach the UK were food supplies – such as the consignment seen here being unloaded in a British port in early 1941. Among those present are Lord Woolton, the British Minister of Food, Averill Harriman, the US Lend-Lease representative, and Robert H Hinkley, the US Assistant Secretary of Commerce. (NARA)

The president went on to state: "On September 27, 1940, by an agreement signed in Berlin, three powerful nations, two in Europe and one in Asia, joined themselves together in the threat that if the United States interfered with or blocked the expansion program of these three nations – a program aimed at world control – they would unite in ultimate action against the United States…

"In view of the nature of this undeniable threat, it can be asserted, properly and categorically, that the United States has no right or reason to encourage talk of peace until the day shall come when there is a clear intention on the part of the aggressor nations to abandon all thought of dominating or conquering the world… If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas – and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us in the Americas would be living at the point of a gun – a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military…

"We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice, as we would show were we at war. We have furnished the British great material support and we will furnish far more in the future."

Members of the Auxiliary Territorial Service servicing machine-guns that arrived from the US as part of the early Lend-Lease shipments. (NARA)



St Paul's Cathedral stands defiant among the surrounding fires and destruction during the Luftwaffe attack on December 29, 1940. Taken from the roof of the *Daily Mail*'s building, this image has been described as "the most famous picture of all time". (Historic Military Press)

THE 'SECOND GREAT FIRE OF LONDON'

Following London and Coventry, the Luftwaffe ranged far and wide across the United Kingdom in its Blitz offensive. Industrial centres, ports and naval bases, urban centres and regional capitals up and down the country all suffered at the hands of Göring's bombers. The bombers, though, never forgot to pay attention to London.

It was the 114th night of the capital's Blitz and scarcely had a day passed without German bombs raining down on the city. But when they returned on December 29 it was different, for on this night, in what has come to be termed the 'Second Great Fire of London', the ancient heart of the capital was ripped apart.

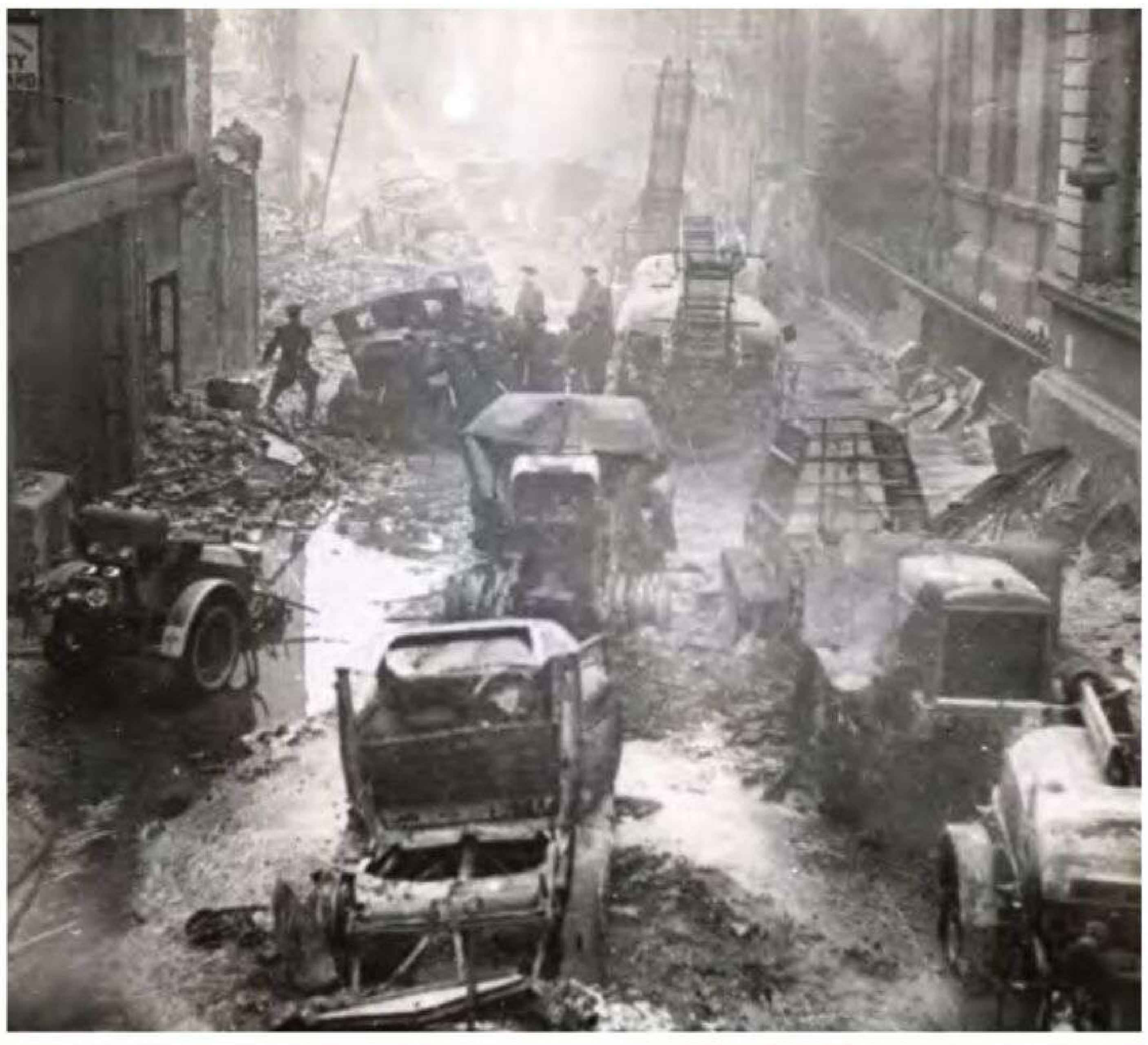
Once again it was the pathfinding Heinkels of Kampfgruppe 100 that led the assault. They were followed by a further 126 machines, most of which were predominantly loaded with incendiaries. It was 18.15 hours when these devices started fluttering down. They "bounced crazily like a football", recalled one Londoner, then "splutter violently for the first minute, throwing white fire about thirty feet, then simmer down in an intense molten mass and burn about ten minutes more".

As the minutes ticked by, more than 1,500 fires were started across London, though most were in or around the famous Square Mile. The popular American journalist Ernie Pyle was in London during the Blitz. At the height of the bombing that night, he went out onto the balcony of his room: "You have all seen big fires, but I doubt if you have ever seen the whole horizon of a city lined with great fires – scores of them, perhaps hundreds. There was something inspiring just in the awful savagery of it. The closest fires were near enough for us to hear the crackling flames and the yells of firemen. Little fires grew into big ones even as we watched. Big ones died down under the firemen's valor [*sic*], only to break out again later."

Though the raid ended at 21.45 hours, the fires burned through the night and into the following morning. Such was the extent of the destruction, one American journalist telegraphed his office describing what he called the "Second Great Fire of London". In fact, the damage was even more severe than that which followed the conflagration that had started in Thomas Farriner's bakery in Pudding Lane in 1666. So intense was the heat in places that the asphalt in the road might burst into flames.

Though earlier raids had seen more enemy aircraft over London delivering more bombs and incendiaries than was the case on December 29, and others had lasted far longer, none caused as much damage, due to the nature of the targets and the timing of the attack. The Square Mile, for example, contained 31 guild halls and 19 churches (including eight built by Sir Christopher Wren) which were all razed to the ground.

The new year brought little respite to the bombing. It would be a few months before the Blitz ended.

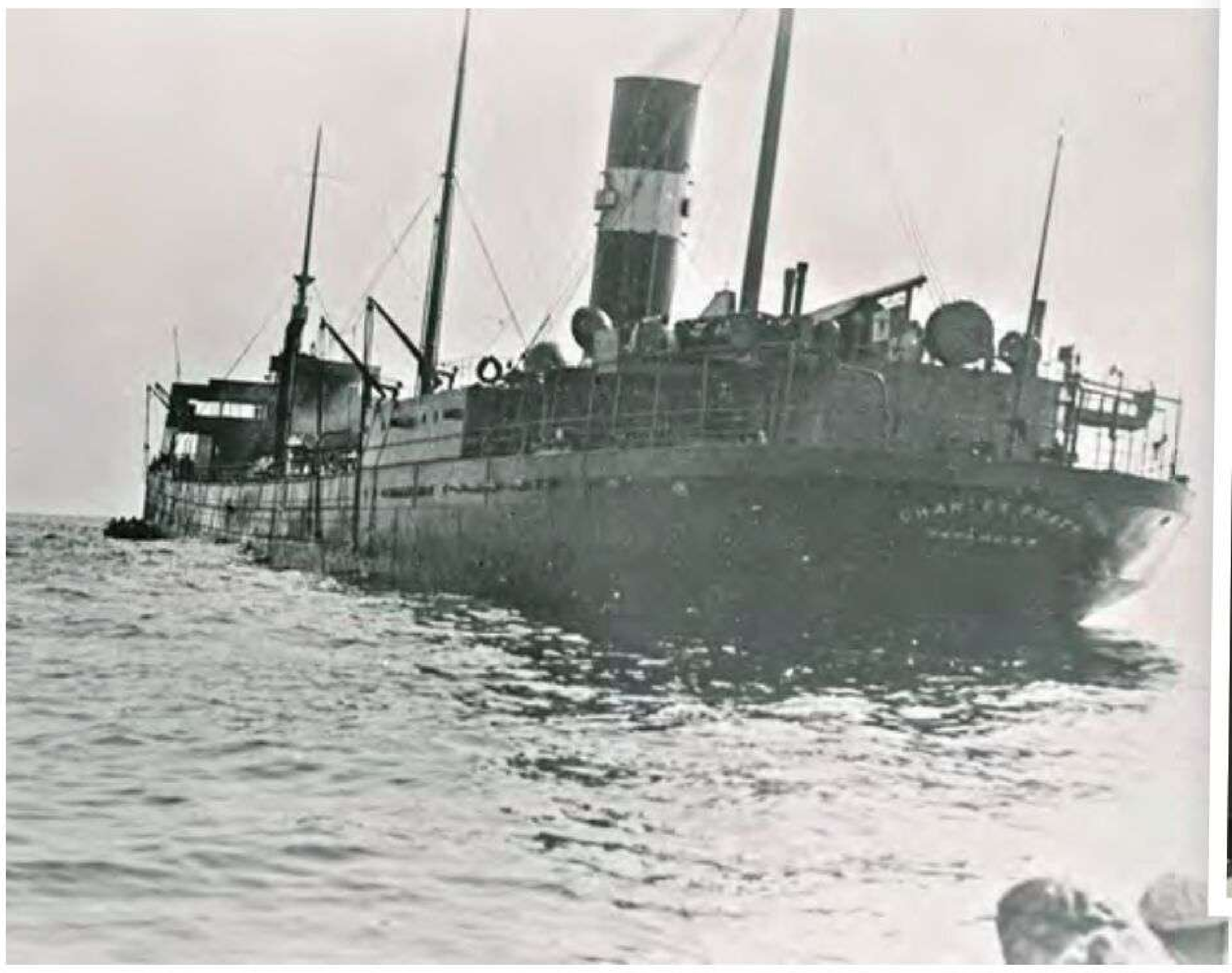


Firemen examine some of their vehicles that were burnt out by the raging fires on December 29. In use at the time, they had to be abandoned when the flames, unable to be held back by the firemen, enveloped them. (Historic Military Press)

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

New Year's Eve in 1940 brought to an end the first 16 months of World War Two, a period in which Europe had been ravaged by a conflict the likes of which had never been seen before. Terrible though the fighting had been, there was some cause for optimism. In particular, the RAF had held off the massed might of Goring's Luftwaffe, with the result that Hitler had all but abandoned any hope of an invasion.

Even though its towns and cities were still being pounded from the air, leading to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, with many more wounded, Britain had survived to fight on. At sea, the Royal Navy was battling to maintain the nation's life-lines with the rest of the world, and in North Africa the Army, which had suffered terrible defeats earlier in the year, was embroiled in a successful offensive against the Italians – the results of which would become apparent in the early part of 1941.


The tanker SS *Charles Pratt* sinking after being torpedoed by a U-boat on December 21, 1940. (Danish National Archives)

As Christmas 1940 approaches, a British evacuee in the US, seven-year-old Joan Bradley, records a festive message for her parents back home in London. (Historic Military Press)

Anti-aircraft fire over Mannheim late on the evening of December 16, 1940. In response to the German Blitz, that night the RAF undertook Operation *Abigail Rachel* against Mannheim. It was intended to mark the first occasion on which the RAF attackers would exceed 200 aircraft. In the event only 134 assorted craft were available.

The year to come would also see the war spread across the rest of the world – a development precipitated by Japan's infamous strike against the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On hearing the news, Churchill later recalled that "being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful".

At the same time that its aircraft and warships were attacking the United States, Japan also unleashed its forces on islands and territories throughout the Pacific region. Thailand, Malaya, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, and Hong Kong were just some of the targets that felt the full force of the Empire of the Rising Sun.

The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor – "a date which will live in infamy" as Roosevelt described it – the United States declared war on Japan. On December 11, Hitler took the decision, virtually without discussion, to do likewise against America. The nation that had only months before declared itself to be "the great arsenal of democracy" had joined the Allied cause.

It could be argued that the events of early December 1941 marked a turning point in World War Two; that the Allied cause, no matter how rocky the road ahead, was assured. In the meantime, however, the fighting raged on.

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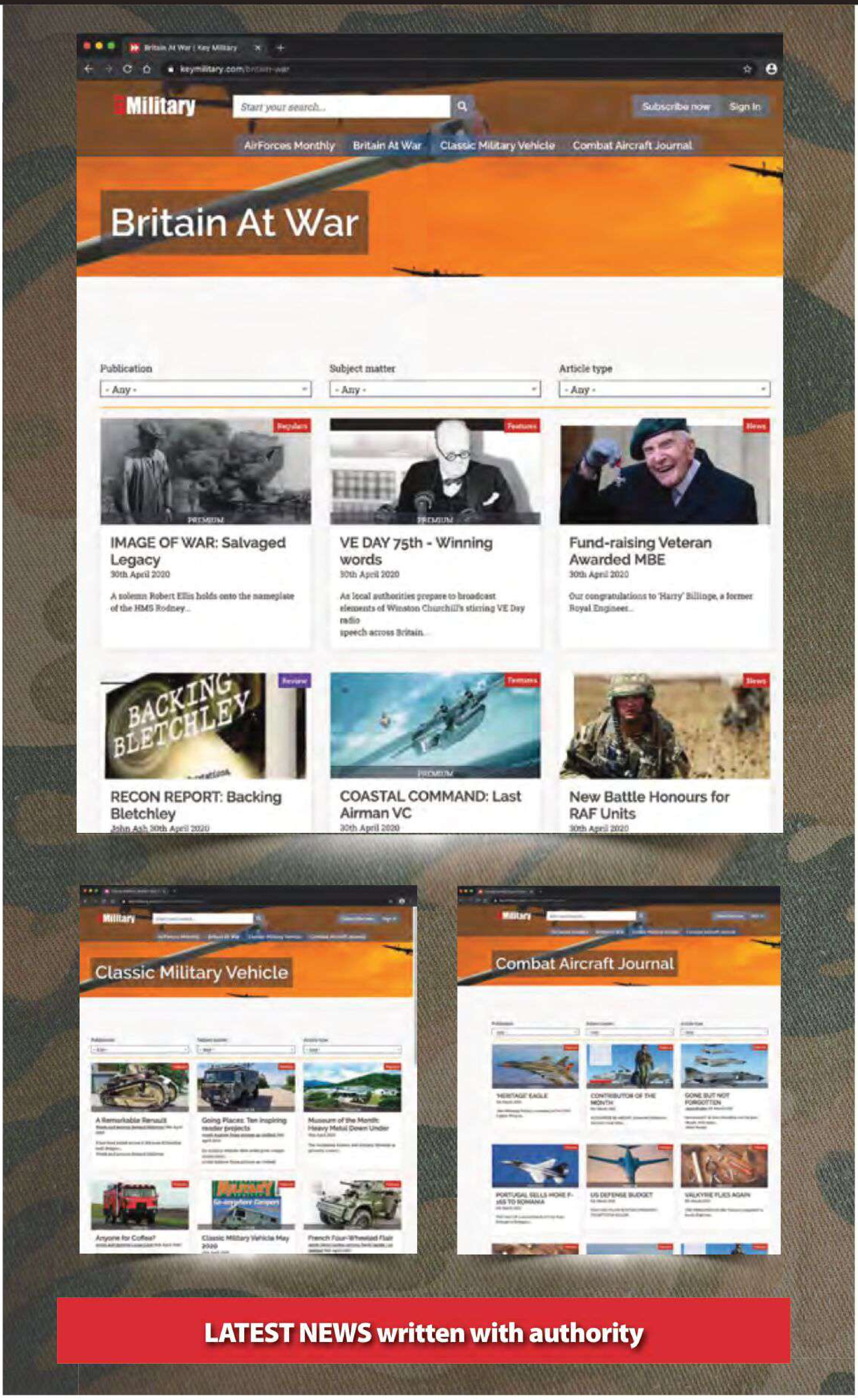

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